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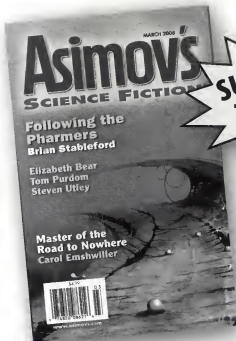
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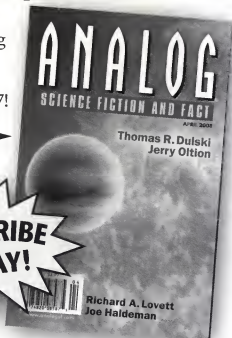
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# Asimov's

## SCIENCE FICTION

JULY 2008

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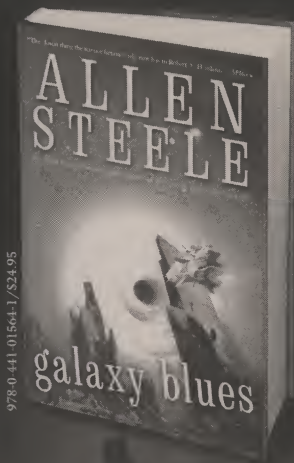
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## TWO ROBOTS AND AN ALIEN WALK INTO A BAR . . .

Coming upon a genuinely funny tale is both a happy and, alas, far too rare occasion. Writers seem considerably more drawn to the dark side of fiction than they are to the light-hearted. I am sometimes criticized for running issues too dominated by serious and weighty stories. I'm always on the lookout for humor, though, and buy as much of it as I can. I enjoy funny stories and I usually find that readers respond quite positively to them as well.

There are many explanations for why the amount of humorous fiction available doesn't meet the demand for it. It could be that I'm seeing a lot more funny stories than I realize but I just don't get the joke. I certainly see stories that people tell me are funny, but which don't work for me. Funny stories can be very hard to do well. In addition to everything else that a regular story needs—strong characterization, fresh ideas, and skillful plotting, a funny tale has to include a sense of timing, possibly a sense of the ridiculous, and certainly insight into what makes people laugh.

"A Portrait of the Artist" (February 2007), Charles Midwinter's tale of an artist and some sentient squirrels, is one very successful example of this sort of story. Not one detail is wasted in this little gem. It's a story that I'd love to see staged as a play. It was also a first sale and it led me to the surprising insight that I seem to encounter

more amusing stories from writers who are new or relatively new to me than from the writers I am most familiar with. Other recent examples of newer writers penning funny tales for us include Felicity Shoulders and Tim McDaniel.

Of course, humor is not completely dominated by new writers. Neal Barrett, Jr., author of the amazing "Ginny Sweetlips' Flying Circus" (February 1988) and more recently, "Slidin'" (April/May 2008), and "Radio Station St. Jack" (which will be appearing in our August issue), is a true poet of the absurd who can make us laugh until we cry about the apocalypse and its aftermath. I have great admiration for authors such as Rudy Rucker and Charles Stross who can make wise-cracks and fashion outrageous scenes while explaining the finer points of the singularity or higher mathematics.

The aforementioned stories represent some of the many kinds of humorous tales. There are the stories that are funny all the way through, stories that are sublimely ridiculous, tales that may be deadly serious except for moments of hilarity, and stories that are inside jokes. Michael Swanwick is the master of the inside joke. His "Letters to the Editor" (October/November 2001) and "Congratulations from the Future" (July 2007) could only have appeared in *Asimov's*. Stories like those run the risk of being dismissed by the untutored reader. Fortunately for us,

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at least 95 percent of you were in on the jokes, and the other 5 percent came up to speed pretty quickly.

Naturally, of course, humor stories run multiple risks. There is the concern that the reader won't get the joke. There's also the possibility that the reader will get the joke, but won't consider it funny. Often, it's the humorous stories that come under the most sustained attacks from critics.

Critics of short, funny stories often seem to be arguing with a straw-man version of the story. They will go after a serious point that they believe the author made or failed to make. Much of the time, these criticisms would be legitimate if the tale had been a serious one, but in the case of the funny story, the serious point may have nothing to do with what the story is really about. It's tempting, but unfair, to dismiss the critic as lacking a sense of humor. More likely, the writer has failed to get the joke across to widest possible audience or else the critic's sense of what is funny is just narrower than it might otherwise be. What makes my job easier, though, is that it's usually those same stories that reap praise from the rest of you.

One other disadvantage for the

authors of funny fiction is that their skillful work may fail to get serious attention. Yes, there are exceptions, like Connie Willis and Howard Waldrop, who are capable of getting their amusing work onto the final ballots for Hugo and Nebula awards. Still, most award finalists seem to have a lot more in common with Connie's heart breaking "The Last of the Winnebagos" (July 1988) than they do with her comic "Even the Queen" (April 1992). Esther M. Friesner, who has delighted us with numerous witty stories, won both her Nebula awards with dark and disturbing pieces.

One type of story I'd like to see a lot more of is the kind that can mix the transformative and the earth shattering with the droll and the hilarious. Like a good Irish wake, the end of the world can be easier to take when served with a dollop of humor. I'm not the only one who likes these tales. Stories that can lighten highly stressful situations with some humor are very popular and often receive critical attention as well. This sort of fiction has a very good shot at bringing home the gold. So authors, please keep this advice in mind the next time you set that doomsday device on a course heading for planet Earth. ○

We welcome your letters. They should be sent to **Asimov's**, 475 Park Avenue South, Floor 11, New York, NY 10016, or e-mailed to **asimovs@dellmagazines.com**. Space and time make it impossible to print or answer all letters, but please include your mailing address even if you use e-mail. If you don't want your address printed, put it only in the heading of your letter; if you do want it printed, please put your address under your signature. We reserve the right to shorten and copy-edit letters. The email address is for editorial correspondence only—please direct all subscription inquiries to: 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855.

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## REREADING STAPLEDON II

A couple of months ago I chose *Odd John*, Olaf Stapledon's tale of a superhuman genius, for the fourth in this series of rereadings of classic science fiction novels. Taking a new look at *Odd John* got me interested in investigating *Last and First Men*, the British philosopher's most famous book, which such people as Arthur C. Clarke and Stanislaw Lem regard as the greatest of all visions of the far future. More than fifty years had gone by since my last reading of it. I had found it overwhelming then. Would it have the same power for me now?

What is immediately apparent is that Stapledon (who lived from 1886 to 1950) may have been a great visionary, but he wasn't much of a prophet. Writing in 1930, he completely failed to foresee the rise of Adolf Hitler just three years later, and spoke of the Germany of his day as "the most pacific [of nations], a stronghold of enlightenment." Instead he singled out Mussolini, who was already in power, as the strongest figure in Europe ("a man whose genius in action combined with his rhetoric and crudity of thought to make him a very successful dictator"). Most—not all—of Stapledon's portrait of the world of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century is equally wrongheaded—"awkward and naïve," as Gregory Benford said in his introduction to a 1988 edition of the book, and even "ludicrous," as Brian Aldiss once observed. Sta-

pledon's account of the near future was so far off the mark that in a 1953 American edition of *Last and First Men* the publisher simply deleted most of the first three chapters of the sixteen-chapter book.

But Stapledon himself knew he was no prophet. In the preface to the first British edition in 1930, he said that he did not intend "actually to prophesy what will as a matter of fact occur; for in our present state such prophecy is certainly futile, save in the simplest matters. We are not to set up as historians attempting to look ahead instead of backwards. We can only select a certain thread out of the tangle of many equally valid possibilities. But we must select with a purpose. The activity we are undertaking is not science, but art; and the effect that it should have on the reader is the effect that art should have."

So *Last and First Men*, by its author's own admission, is art—fiction—and not an attempt to predict the future. But it is fiction of a very strange kind, because it is almost totally lacking in such standard fictional appurtenances as character, dialog, and plot. In form it is a work of history, of sorts, a sober and solemn account of the passing eons to come, written in much the same tone as might be used for a chronicle of human life in the Pleistocene or of the development of constitutional theory in Great Britain. It's a sign of Stapledon's great artistry that he man-

ages to make his history of the future such compelling reading.

To quote him again: "Our aim is not merely to create aesthetically admirable fiction. We must achieve neither mere history, nor mere fiction, but myth. . . . This book can no more claim to be true myth than true prophecy. But it is an essay in myth creation."

*Neither mere history, nor mere fiction, but myth.* Yes, indeed. And it is, I think, triumphantly successful at that.

The early chapters are hard going because of their manifest failures of prophecy. When we find him predicting an Anglo-French war around 1950 that ends with France ruling all of Europe and England virtually destroyed, we shake our heads. He misses the development of atomic energy, too, giving us only the invention of an explosive weapon so terrible that everyone agrees to destroy the formula for it, and does. But he does hit the target now and then. His analysis of the geopolitical importance of oil is especially shrewd: "The expenditure of oil had of course been wholly uncontrolled and wasteful [and] a shortage was already being felt. Thus the national ownership of the remaining oil fields had become a main factor in politics and a fertile source of wars."

And who can fail to feel a shock of recognition at his description of Americans: "Universally feared and envied, universally respected for their enterprise, yet for their complacency very widely despised, the Americans were rapidly changing the whole character of man's existence. By this time every human being throughout the planet made use of American products, and there

was no region where American capital did not support local labor. Moreover the American press, gramophone, radio, cinematograph, and television ceaselessly drenched the planet with American thought." This a decade before World War II, when the United States still lived in isolation from the world, safe behind the barriers of the two great oceans that formed its boundaries!

Even so, most of what Stapledon has to say about the near future is, as Aldiss said, "ludicrous." A particularly egregious example is the episode three or four hundred years from now in which negotiators from China and the United States—the two great world powers of the era—meet to hash out a treaty. The American is dressed in a sort of Puritan costume ("a decent gray coat and breeches") and the Chinese delegate wears traditional Chinese garb, "a sky-blue silk pajama suit, embroidered with golden dragons." It is all very silly, and it is hard for one not to wince.

Finally, in the fifth chapter, comes the total collapse of our civilization and a series of catastrophes, some manmade and some natural, that make most of our planet uninhabitable and come close to wiping out all of humanity, and Stapledon begins to hit his stride as a science fiction writer. The wonders begin: a mutation that creates the glorious Second Men, a species of big-brained geniuses who live for hundreds of years, then an invasion from Mars that owes a good deal to H.G. Wells and leaves the Earth devastated again, and then the emergence of another dominant kind of humanity, the Third Men, "slightly more than half the stature of their pre-

decessors," with immense silken ears that are "expressive both of temperament and passing mood," and "great lean hands, on which were six versatile fingers, six antennae of living steel."

At this point the book is just past the halfway mark, and he starts to hurry his tale along. When he tells us in Chapter Five that we will now skip over the next ten million years, because it was a time of barbarism and stasis, we understand that we are entering a visionary dream. (Ten million years: what an enormously long span! If we go back ten million years from our own day, nothing remotely like a human being has yet evolved.) In the remaining pages Stapledon unfurls one successor species after another—there will be eighteen types of human being in all, over a span of two billion years—and, by so doing, set a mark of inventiveness that the rest of us have been striving to match for nearly eighty years. As he piles one wonder atop another he swings the reader's mind as though in a centrifuge, and then sends it swirling agreeably off to undreamed-of distant places.

But the book isn't just a zoo of fantastical entities. What is really unrolling before us is a pattern of cyclical history—evolutionary leaps, the development of stunningly enlightened civilizations, inevitable collapses into barbarism or even worse, and, eventually, some new resurgence. In the guise of fantasy he is actually creating an allegory of our own species' uncertain climb from its early days of savagery to what we smugly think of as our grand modern era, and reminding us that human progress is an uncertain thing and that the direction of the march is not always upward.

\* \* \*

There are problems of scale, as that ten-million-year leap indicates. Some events, like the political struggles of our own near future and the onset of the Martian invasion, are told in very fine detail. Others are grandly skipped over (the Tenth through Thirteenth Men get only a single page for all four species). Stapledon is aware of this, and explains it by saying that he's trying to make his book comprehensible to readers of our own day.

He greatly underestimates the pace of scientific advance. "It did not take the Fifth Men many centuries to devise a tolerable means of voyaging in interplanetary space," he tells us, though the Fifth Men are a wondrous race of near-immortal superbeings, and we pitiful primitive First Men managed the trick only a decade after Stapledon's death. As for gene-splicing, which we have already developed, Stapledon finally allots it to the Third Men, forty million years in our future, who begin with "simple breeding experiments, but later . . . by crude physiological manipulation of the young animal, the fetus, and (later still) the germ plasm." On the other hand, the Martians get to Earth by traveling on the solar winds, possibly the first mention of this concept in science fiction.

Again and again Stapledon shows himself to be an amateur novelist by a curious lack of specificity: the chain reaction that destroys the world of the Second Men is caused by a "critical element," but he doesn't tell us which one, and the historical records of that era are stored on metal plates "constructed of an immensely durable artificial element," a Gernsbackian construc-

tion that no modern SF writer would have used. He speaks of "ingenious methods" for solving a problem, and "a certain marine salt" as a cause of infant mortality, but doesn't specify. Such vagueness recurs many times. But these flaws don't matter. The book is a breathtaking vision, one of the greatest works of science fiction ever written. And—after a dark epilog that seems to foreshadow the terrible war only nine years in Stapledon's future—comes a marvelous epilog to the epilog, with the dazzlingly endowed Eighteenth Men at the

brink of extinction, summing up humanity's two billion years of cyclical striving: "Man himself, at the very least, is music, a brave theme that makes music also of its vast accompaniment, its matrix of storms and stars. Man himself in his degree is eternally a beauty in the eternal form of things. It is very good to have been man. And so we may go forward together with laughter in our hearts, and peace, thankful for the past, and for our own courage. For we shall make after all a fair conclusion to this brief music that is man." ○

## IN MEMORIAM

**Janet Kagan**

1946-2008

Janet Kagan, who died on February 29, 2008, of Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease, was an author whose work was immensely popular with the readers of *Asimov's*. From 1989–1992, she practically owned the annual Readers' Award novelette category. Her first Mama Jason story, "The Loch Moose Monster" (March 1989), about the plucky settlers on the planet Mirabile and their adventures and misadventures with the genetic chimerae hidden in their daffodils and otters, came in first, while her next tale, "The Return of the Kangaroo Rex" (October 1989) came in second. The following year, "Getting the Bugs Out" (November 1990) won the award while "The Flowering Inferno" (March 1990) came in third. A year later, her last two Mama Jason stories, "Raising Cane" (March 1991) and "Frankenswine" (August 1991) took second and third place. In 1992, these wonderful stories were knitted together and published by Tor Books as the highly regarded novel, *Mirabile*. In addition to winning Janet her last Readers' Award, her 1992 non-Mirabile story, "The Nutcracker Coup" (December), was a finalist for the Nebula Award and the winner of the Hugo Award. Janet's work was the inspiration for my young adult anthology *The Loch Moose Monster: More Stories from Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* (Delacorte Press 1993), and I was grateful to her for allowing me to borrow the name of her story for the title of the book. Janet was well able to combine warmth and humor with dramatic plotting. We hadn't seen anything new from her for many years, but the legacy that she left in the pages of *Asimov's* will last for a very long time.

—Sheila Williams

# LETTERS

Dear Editor,

I just read a back issue of your magazine that I'd overlooked for some reason or other, and wanted to send in some reader comments. The issue was the February 2007 one, and the story that got me to write in was called "A Portrait of the Artist," by Charles Midwinter. I loved this story. The author does a nice job of leaving enough up for grabs, while grounding everything in some pretty good character interaction. The turn-arounds at the end are solid and the plotting in general is short-story gold. This is precisely the type of stuff I want to read when I sit down with a short-story mag. Please try to get some more material from him. You already may have, and I just haven't gotten there yet, but keep up the pressure, all the same. Thanks for a great read!

Al Wilson

Dear Editor,

I just finished the September issue of *Asimov's*, and feel that I have to write. "How Music Begins" was a compelling story, probably made even more so by my personal experience in both playing in a concert band in junior high and high school and my much later completion of a Bachelors in music. (I originally went for a degree in Music Education, but had to change to Jazz Studies when I lost my sight—it doesn't seem wise to try to lead a room full of young adults with thousands of dollars worth of musical instruments if you can't see them). The

story was enticing and well written. However, it left me wanting more. I want to now hear the story from Elise's point of view, perhaps with the mystery explained at the end. Many reasons spring to mind as to why the band was abducted, and I'm sure the author probably has yet another I haven't thought of. It's stories like this that inspire me to work harder on my own writing.

On the other hand, the story "What Wolves Know" was an interesting tale, but I seem to have missed the science fictional or fantastic aspect of the tale. I'm not sure why it was in the magazine. I kept waiting throughout the story for it, but it never materialized.

Nicole Massey  
Arlington, TX

Dear Editors,

Greg Egan's story "Dark Integers" in the October/November 2007 issue is well written and entertaining, BUT...

Many SF and fantasy stories require a suspension of disbelief, but this story requires one that I just cannot make. I cannot make myself think that mathematics follows in some way from the behavior of the real world, or that altering mathematics can change the real world. It is just too strongly ingrained in me that mathematics is *entirely* the work of man, totally disconnected from the real world. Sure, it's useful for understanding and analyzing the real world, but that does not mean that one governs the other. No one is

watching propositions as if they were real objects to see what axioms they obey (what does "obey" mean in a mathematical context, anyway?). In fact Egan mixes the abstract and the concrete to such an extent that at times his prose descends into meaningless gibberish. ("... send a plume of alternative mathematics back across the border ..."? "... wiggling the border between the two systems back and forth to encode each transmitted bit"? Come on!) And all this without getting specific enough to get a handle on anything. Just what cluster of propositions behave differently? In what way do dark integers play by different rules?

All this is not to say that I didn't enjoy the story; it's just that reading it made me feel like I was walking on quicksand. I prefer stories based on solid ground.

Bruce M. Foreman  
Chambersburg, PA

Dear Ms. Williams,

I've read and re-read Chris Butler's short story "The Turn" (October/November 2007). The story's details seem deliberately to suggest real-world referents, but I've failed to discover the grand analogy. I don't mind being disappointed with myself, as long as I eventually receive enlightenment. But I do mind wasting my time thinking about a story whose every detail turns out to be nothing but a maguffin. Please enlighten me.

Paul Palmer  
Pittsburgh, PA

*We hesitate to suggest glibly that sometimes "a pipe is just a pipe," for that would almost certainly negate several renowned graduate programs, so, in the case of interpreting the fiction in Asimov's, we feel it's*

*best to allow readers to draw their own conclusions, no matter how Byzantine or prosaic these interpretations may be.*

Dear Editor,

Although I really liked "Leonid Skies," I was just wondering why Carl Frederick "made" Adrian speak the way he did. It felt like a mix between Little Lord Fauntleroy and the sort of polite American kid one sees on the tele. Nothing like what I hear on the bus in the mornings (not that that would necessarily be printable).

John Fairhurst  
Stockport UK

*Another of our readers, Simon Robert of Devon UK, found Carl Frederick's future-slang somewhat outlandish as well. Considering some of the unpleasantly colorful epithets we hear from callow youth on mass transportation, perhaps Carl should only be accused of good-natured wishful thinking.*

Dear Asimov's,

What a joyous day when my December issue arrived and I saw that it had a long awaited Connie Willis Christmas story in it. I saved it till I had time (the next day) to sit and enjoy the whole thing at once. It just isn't a great Christmas without a new Connie Willis story. When that December issue arrives without one I feel so let down. You cannot imagine my joy upon seeing the cover this year. Anticipation was running high. I was not disappointed—it was a wonderful story. I'm just glad that I am so forgetful that I will be able to read it a couple more times before the ending doesn't come as a surprise.

Also, loving the Coyote stories.

More, please. Tim McDaniel's "The Lonesome Planet Travelers' Advisory" was such a hoot that I'm going to have to read it to some of my friends.

Thanks for all the years of great SF, thoughtful editorials and columns, and informative reviews and other columns.

Sandy Dusel  
Ontario, NY

Dear Editor,

I just wanted to let you know that I enjoyed the serialization of *Galaxy Blues* by Allen M. Steele. I hope we'll be seeing more serialized novels in the near future.

Cameron LiDestri  
Stratford, CT

*We're pleased to report Galaxy Blues received uniformly positive reader responses. While we won't rule out the possibility of a new serial if we find one that truly strikes our fancy, serials will never be a regular component of Asimov's.*

Dear Asimov's,

I've been reading your magazine now for three years, ever since I picked up a random copy in a used bookstore and I have yet to read a story I didn't enjoy on some level. A few left me wanting more, but these were rare and I've found myself eagerly awaiting each new issue. However, it was not until Connie Willis' new Christmas novella that an Asimov's story made me want to write in and express my gratitude and joy; no small feat considering we are currently in the middle of a freezing blizzard, when I would much rather be in my cozy bed.

It's been a long time, in this over-commercialized age, since a Christmas story hit me in such a poignant

way as did "All Seated on the Ground." Not only were tears made to form, but I was laughing out loud in more places than I could count. The characterizations of both Dr. Morthman and Reverend Thresher had me sympathizing with Meg, and cheering when the Altairi finally put them in their places. And really, I've never seen a more true description of a teenage choir, from the cell phones to the bickering to the camera-happy moms. My toque is off to Ms. Willis and her muses, for giving me a Christmas story that I will be passing down the line for many seasons to come.

I believe my dog is expecting a written apology, though, for the number of times I frightened her with my sudden and violent giggle fits. That, or she's really an Altairi in Chihuahua form.

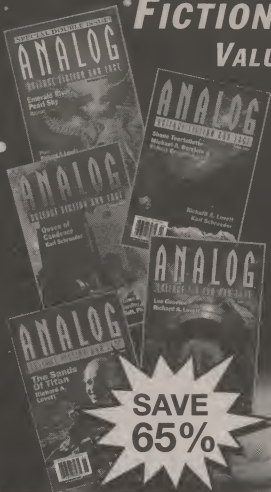
Andrea Jacobsen  
Thunder Bay, Ontario

Dear Ms. Williams,

Having read your editorial "My Rowboat" in the February issue, I thought you might enjoy hearing about a much earlier use of the rowboat pun. A short story titled "The Astounding Dr. Amizov [sic]", by R.F. DeBaun (*Analog*, January 1974), centers on a prominent science fiction writer (and scientist, and Shakespeare biographer), who secretly owes his prodigious output to the fact that he has made five clones of himself. Anyway, the story tells us that among his most famous works is the classic "I, Rowboat" which is described (here I quote from thirty-four-year old memory) as the "tragic tale of an intelligent dinghy making its way in a hostile world."

Gary W. Lucas  
Salem, CT

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## WHEN THE WHOLE WORLD LOOKED UP

*We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.*

—Oscar Wilde

I figured out what inspired me to write science fiction on a dark and lonely afternoon in the New Haven Public Library. I was in Connecticut to research a mystery novel set in 1969 (eventually published as the award-nominated *War at Home*, under my pen name Kris Nelscott).

I was going through microfiche of the *New Haven Register* from July of 1969 and I found an article titled: "Science Fiction A Jump Ahead; Space Journeys Already Forgotten."<sup>1</sup>

The article had come through the Associated Press, and it was a glowing account of how science fiction had predicted space travel long before the Apollo program started. The article starts like this:

"To the science fiction writers who predicted it in the first place, the [upcoming] moon flight of Apollo 11 is old hat."

I'm sure it wasn't; I'm sure the SF writers quoted in the article, from Isaac Asimov to Arthur C. Clarke, were as excited and worried about the upcoming moon landing as the rest of us were. That they had predicted it didn't mean they weren't nervous about it.

But none of that nervousness showed in the article. Instead, what the article dealt with in a very serious way was the then-current trends in science fiction. My former boss and editorial predecessor at *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, Edward L. Ferman, was quot-

**The ever-popular Kristine Kathryn Rusch looks at an era when it seemed that the whole world was enchanted with the promise of space travel.**

ed as saying that stories with "space travel as their central theme" were "getting harder and harder to find."

John Campbell, the influential editor of *Analog*, said that "modern" science fiction "ranges even beyond the soft sciences [to] explore concepts the sociologists wouldn't touch."

The article is upbeat and interesting. I was so happy to see it that I spent the five cents to make a photocopy and I've kept it on my desk ever since.

But my story of inspiration doesn't stop there. My journey into 1969 was only beginning in New Haven. From there, I went to New York City and spent hours in the Paley Center for Media. And there I watched a Charles Kuralt television special called, "The Day They Landed."

Kuralt and his team spent July 20, 1969, traveling from first light on the East Coast to sundown in Hawaii. His goal for the show was to "to stop time for history, to show 2069 what the world was like the day human beings landed on the moon."<sup>2</sup>

I clearly needed this for my research into 1969. The piece started with the moon landing itself and surprisingly, I found myself in tears as I watched it, listening to the remembered voices and seeing the film that got filtered back to Earth.

A little personal history: In July, 1969, I had just turned nine. My life was punctuated with weird outer

space moments—broadcasts interrupted as astronauts orbited the Earth or were blasted in tin cans that sent them out into the darkness of space to achieve President Kennedy's dream of a moon landing before the end of the 1960s.

Each pronouncement by NASA was news, and each astronaut was famous, celebrities for which we have no modern equivalent. In those days, people talked about real-life heroes—and they meant the explorers who risked their lives to expand our vision beyond the boundaries of Earth.

We all believed that by the far away future of 2008, we would have bases on the moon. We would have landed humans on Mars and we would be conquering the rest of the solar system.

But more on that in a moment.

In my 1969 research, I learned a few things. Such as the fact that more than three thousand bombs blew up in the United States. Most were created by domestic terrorists, often college students associated with the SDS. So many bombs exploded that they weren't national news. They were local news.

Like the riots, like the anti-war protests. The press couldn't keep up. A bomb going off in a department store, such as the one that went off at Goldblatt's in Chicago in April, didn't receive coverage outside of Illinois.<sup>3</sup> Now a story like that would be front and center of every national newscast.

In 1969, there were thirty-seven airplane hijackings, and that was just within the U.S. Nine thousand three hundred Americans died in Vietnam that year. I couldn't find the figures for the Vietnamese and Laotian dead. Or the number of people killed or injured in the various protests across America.

The upheaval and divisions in this country in 1969 make what's going

on in the world right now look like a respite.

Which made that moon landing even more spectacular. America stopped its war on itself for a brief moment, and everyone looked up. Here are my notes from Kuralt's special, taken while I watched:

Showed people all over, including army officers, people in their homes, people outside, people in a trailer park watching on a TV. They watched at the commune; showed a priest and altar boys watching; Cronkite and others crying; elderly people in a home watching, along with the nurses, dressed traditionally. They're crying too. And there is applause.

Kuralt said, "Seventy-five million Americans watched TV that day—pushed by fear, led by hope."<sup>4</sup>

I was one of those seventy-five million. It was a hot summer afternoon—a rarity in Superior, Wisconsin—and I was a little nut-brown tomboy, playing tag with my friends. My mother called me inside to see the landing, something I'd said I wanted to see, and I remember complaining about it. The game seemed so much more important.

But in the unairconditioned house, the curtains drawn to keep the day's heat at bay, the television showed something magical. I can still recall the scratch of the couch beneath my bare legs; my father leaning forward in his easy chair, his elbow on his knee and his hand tucked under his chin as he stared; my mother sitting beside me in her bright yellow sundress, her arms crossed as she worried that the landing would fail.

A lot of the images I saw in my review of that day so long ago were familiar to me. Some I hadn't seen in more than thirty years, and others had been shown over and over again until they had become meaningless.

But watching the old tapes and reading the old articles, I remembered something—something important.

I remembered the hope.

To those of us who were young in 1969, the moon landing was a formative experience. All of my little friends and I wanted to be astronauts. It didn't matter to me that "girls can't," as a boy in my neighborhood so rudely told me. We wanted to take part in the glory, to be explorers, to have the chance to look at the Earth from outer space and to say to someone else, "Look! I was born on that blue and white ball down there."

It's no accident that director Ron Howard (born 1954) has made a film about the Apollo program and has sponsored several others. No accident that Tom Hanks (born 1956) was in that film and narrated *From The Earth to the Moon*, a history of the space program, for HBO.

In 2007, late night talk show host Craig Ferguson (born 1962) interviewed Alan Bean, one of the twelve men who walked on the moon, and acted as if he were interviewing a god.

To someone in the baby boom generation, the astronauts were gods. And even now, for those of us of a certain age, those Apollo astronauts represent our best hopes and our dreams.

A few nights ago, I heard a commercial on a local radio station. The sounds of the moon landing played as if they were happening now. Then a news announcer cut in, "We interrupt this broadcast for an *important* news bulletin" as if what they were already playing wasn't important at all. The breaking news was about cheap toner at Staples.

By the time the commercial ended, I was furious.

As a former broadcaster and a woman who once wrote commercials, I know what happened. The

advertiser wanted to juxtapose a real-life news event with something silly, to show how our sense of the important had skewed.

And I have a hunch the lawyers got involved—or maybe the politically correct police: *You can't use something like the fires in Southern California or the Iraq war as your background news story. People got hurt in that and no one would see the humor in the commercial. Let's use something no longer important. Let's use the moon landing.*

To entire generations, the moon landing is as distant as World War I. To some Americans, the moon landing isn't as important as the American Civil War.

But to some of us, the moon landing was the one of the central events of our young lives.

It inspired me to become a science fiction writer because it taught me several important things: It taught me that human beings can do anything if we but try; it taught me that hope can interrupt the world's mayhem if only for a few hours; and it taught me to look up.

Whoever designed the catchphrase for the current documentary, *In the Shadow of the Moon*, defined this feeling best for me:

*Remember when the whole world looked up?*

I do.

Quite vividly.

And I want us to look up again.

The world is very different now and yet startlingly the same. It is still full of mayhem. People die in senseless wars and children are starving. Poverty hasn't been eradicated, and we're still earthbound.

Science fiction is different, too. It's no longer the genre of miracles. Science fiction writers don't get interviewed when some grand scientific event happens, mostly because grand

scientific events happen all the time.

For example, here are the stories from the science section in the *Oregonian* newspaper the day that I started this article:

- An astronaut from Eugene, Oregon, will go up on the next shuttle.

- Scientists are working on a gravitational "tractor" to deflect asteroids

- Biologists are altering the composition of trees to create biofuel

- Geneticists have started cloning redwood trees to recreate ancient forests

- Within the year, huts built for survival on the moon will be tested in Antarctica.

That's the science section. The business section has articles on Verizon's decision to open its "walled" coverage to other media—which reminded me that my Verizon phone has more memory than the computers that handled all of the Apollo missions combined. And, to top it off, my phone looks like—and has more features than—the communicators used by Kirk, Spock, and McCoy in the original *Star Trek*.

This morning, I listened to a podcast of "Nightfall," on my iPod.<sup>5</sup> This afternoon, an e-mail group I'm on spent the entire day discussing whether or not authors should blog. Striking writers in Hollywood are asking for a piece of the internet downloads of television shows.

An international space station orbits the Earth. The Chinese and Japanese have developed their own space programs. Russia is reviving its program. People in the private sector (most of them in their forties and fifties—no surprise there) are exper-

imenting with new vehicles to get humans into space.

We live in a science fiction world. Not the world we imagined in 1969, but one in which I—a huge fan of the space program once upon a time—can't tell you the name of a single modern astronaut. When the news announces that the upcoming night will be so clear that we'll be able to see the shuttle, I sometimes forget to look.

I'm used to shuttle launches and expanding computer power. I use satellites all the time. My favorite television programs reach me via satellite. The GPS in my phone tracks me from moment to moment—using a satellite. When I'm researching areas I haven't been to for a while, I go to websites that feature real-time satellite photos of the area and zoom in, until I can see the license plates on the cars parked in the street.

I have gotten used to the changes. I no longer marvel at things that would have caused my jaw to drop fifteen years ago. Until I went to New Haven and saw that article on the great imaginers—the people who envisioned what this world would become, the SF writers whose bold vision had eventually made the moon landing possible—I had forgotten one of the grandest and most glorious aspects of science fiction.

In one of the darkest times this country has ever known, science—and science fiction—gave us hope. It distracted us from the ugly events on the ground, and made us look up.

For a brief shining moment, it made us forget the gutter—and dream of the stars. ○

<sup>1</sup> New Haven Register, July 12, 1969.

<sup>2</sup> Kuralt, Charles, "The Day They Landed," television program archived in the Paley Center for Media.

<sup>3</sup> Chicago Daily Defender, April 10, 1969, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Kuralt, Charles, "The Day They Landed," television program archived in the Paley Center for Media.

<sup>5</sup> Download your own copy at [www.escapepod.org](http://www.escapepod.org).

# LESTER YOUNG AND THE JUPITER'S MOONS' BLUES

Gord Sellar

Gord Sellar was born in Malawi, grew up in Nova Scotia and Saskatchewan, and has been living in South Korea since 2002. He has sold work to *Nature*, *Flurb*, *Postcards from Hell*, *Fantasy*, and *Interzone*. The author is also a jazz saxophonist, and, although he hasn't played in a jazz group since 2002, he did play with a moderately successful Korean indie-rock band from 2002-2004. The inspiration for his narrator Robbie's voice owes much to Miles Davis. He tells us, "When I decided to write something about jazz, the voice and many distinctive expressions used by Davis in his autobiography and in interviews I'd seen just bubbled up from high-school memories. In jazz, we often steal one another's riffs and rearrange them—that's old-school remixing, really—and in a sense, this is a fond and respectful tribute-via-remix of Miles Davis himself." Readers can learn more about the author at his website [gordsellar.com](http://gordsellar.com).

**H**is first night back on Earth after his gig on the Frogships, Bird showed up at Minton's cleaner than a broke-dick dog, with a brand new horn and a head full of crazy-people music. He'd got himself a nice suit somewhere, and a fine new Conn alto. Now, this was back in '48, when everyone—me included—was crazy about Conn and King and only a few younger cats were playing on Selmer horns.

But it wasn't just that big-shouldered suit and the horn; the cat was clean. I mean *clean*, no more dope, no more liquor, no more fried chicken. Hell, he was always called Bird—short for Yardbird—on account of how much fried chicken he liked to eat. This was like a whole different Charlie Parker. He was living clean as a monk. He was walking straight and talking clear. His eyes weren't all fucked-up and scary anymore, either.

To be honest, I didn't recognize him when he walked into Minton's. It was about three AM, and the regular jam session had been going for a long time, and all these cats from Philly had shown up, you know, dressed up like country negroes on Sunday morning and playing all that Philadelphia grandpa-swing they used to like to play. Smooth and all, but old-fashioned, especially for 1948. Even in New York City, the hotbed of bebop and the only place where the Frogs were taking jazz musicians on tour, there was still a lotta old guys dressed up in Zoot suits cut for them five years before, trying to play like Coleman Hawkins and Johnny Hodges and Lester Young used to in the old days, before they all disappeared. Bebop was huge, but a lot of ignorant cats, they were trying to resist it, still disrespecting us, calling what we played "Chinese music" and shit.

But Bird, he was clean like I said, but he played some shit like I never heard before, like nobody never heard before. I'm telling you, when he went up on the bandstand and brought that horn up to his mouth, the music that came out of it was . . . well, it made us crazy. Back in those days, we were like mad scientists when it came to sounds. We'd be taking a leak at the same time and one of us would break wind and we all knew what note it was. We'd call it together, turn to one another laughing and shit, and say, "E-flat, Jack, you just farted an E-flat." And that night we'd play every third tune in E-flat.

But them tunes Bird was playing, man, I ain't never heard nobody put notes together like that. The rhythms were so tangled up that even I had to listen close to catch them all. He was playing thirty-seven notes evenly spaced across a four-beat bar in fast swing, crazy licks like that, and he was playing all these halfway tunings, quarter tones and multiphonics and all kinds of craziness. And even so, he was *swinging*.

Everyone went crazy, it was just too much. And Bird just grinned like a goddamn king and said, in that snooty British gentleman accent he used to like to put on sometimes, "Ladies and gents, this music is the wave of the future. It received its *dé-but* off the rings of Saturn, and if you don't like it, you can come right on up here and kiss my royal black ass."

Them old guys, the Zoot suit cats, they didn't like that, but they didn't say nothing. Everyone remembered how Bird never took no shit off nobody back before he went off touring the solar system.

Man, all that scared me a little, but I still wanted to get onto one of them

Frogships and hear what kind of music everyone was playing up there. They were hiring cats, everyone knew that, but that was all I knew about it. Now, I hadn't never met Bird before, and I knew he wasn't going to talk to me, but Max Roach, Max was drumming there that night, and I'd met Max one time before there at Minton's, so I figured I could talk to him.

Max, he'd gone up onto the Frogships a year or two back. Well, he looked at me like he knew what I wanted, what I was gonna ask about, but he sat down to talk to me anyway. I told him I wanted onto the ships, wanted to know how to get in.

"You audition, same as for anything else," he said, shrugging. "Who knows what they like? Don't ask me."

"But you been on the ships . . ."

"Uh-huh," Max said, nodded, but didn't say no more.

"What kind of music they hire *you* to play?"

"Oh, man, you just need to play whatever," he said in that quiet, calm voice of his. He was a really cool, soulful cat most of the time. "Some of the time, they take cats who swing the old way, real old-fashioned; like what Duke's band used to play in the old days, or Billy Eckstine's. Hell, sometimes they want New Orleans funeral songs, or some cat who plays like Jelly Roll Morton. Other times they only take cats who play real *hard* bebop, man. You can't never know what they want. But anyway, you don't need to go on up to the ships. It messes a cat up, man." He tapped the tablecloth with his drumsticks, hit my glass of bourbon with one of them. *Ting*.

I know better now, but then I just thought he was stonewalling me. Figured maybe there were only limited spaces, and he was bullshitting me, trying to keep gigs open for cats he knew better.

"What do you mean?" I said. "Look at Bird! Remember when he left? Cat *went up there* looking like death on a soda cracker, and look at him now!" I glanced over and saw him sitting at a table with Diz and Miles and Monk and Art Blakey and Fat Girl Navarro and a couple of them white women who used to hang around at Minton's. They were laughing like a bunch of old women, like someone had just told a joke a second before. Bird, he wasn't fat no more, he was lean, and real clear-headed and healthy-looking, nothing like when let his ass out of Camarillo. He looked like a cat with a long life ahead of him.

"Bird's been different, *always*, man," Max said. "He's just that kind of cat. Plus, they *fixed* him up. They wanted him bad, so they took him apart and then put him back together out there. A lot of cats, they just . . ." Then he stopped, like he didn't know what to say, and his eyes went a little scary, the way Bird's used to be, and he looked at me like he could see through my skin or something, and said, "Look, cats almost never come back like he did. The things that go on . . . you can't even imagine," he said.

The room went quiet sometime while we were talking, and I could tell Max was relieved. He didn't like talking about the Frogships, didn't want to recommend them to nobody. We both looked around and saw other people were all staring at the back of the club, at the entrance, and what do you know but this big tall-assed Frog had come on in the back and was standing there watching us all.

These days there ain't a lot of cats who remember what the Frogs looked like, really. It's been so long since they moved on, and let me tell you, the pictures don't show not even the half of it. They were like these big frogs who stretched their skin over a real tall man, but they had more eyes and weird-assed hands. No fingers, just some tentacles on the ends of their goddamned arms, man, and they walked on two legs. Now, this Frog, he was fat, and he wore a Zoot suit tailored specially for him, hat and all, which just made him look totally *out*, man, just crazy. He came in with three or four guys, white hipsters, and they sat themselves down at a table in the front of the club that was set out for them in a hurry.

That Frog, he was smoking long, black cigarettes, four or five of them at once, on these long jade cigarette holders. He was looking around, too, with all these eyes on his face, as if to say, *Where's the goddamn music?* I looked at him closely, and noticed that his skin, his face and hands, even his suit, it was all a little blurry, like a badly shot photograph. He puffed on his cigarettes and looked around.

Nobody said nothing.

But all these cats, especially them sad Philly boys, they all thought it was their big chance. They hurried on up onto the bandstand, and they started to play their jumped-up jive-ass swing. That old Frog just leaned on back in its chair and kept on smoking those slow-burning black cigarettes, sticking its long blue tongue up into the smoke as it puffed it out. There were little black eyes all over its tongue, too, and they swiveled toward the bandstand.

I couldn't tell if it was bored or enjoying the show, but I do know that finally, after they finished a few tunes, Bird had had enough. He tapped Thelonious Monk on the shoulder, and Monk nodded, and stood up, and went up to the bandstand. Everyone had heard about what had happened that night at the Three Deuces back in January in 1946; everyone knew how these Frog cats felt about Monk's music.

Man, Thelonious, he just went on up to the piano and sat down, and everyone else on the bandstand just watched him, every one of them quiet and thinking, *Oh shit*. Monk, he lifted up his hands, all dramatic like he was about to play a Beethoven sonata or whatever, like that, you know what I mean, and when everyone shut up he started playing.

*"Straight, No Chaser."* That was a fine tune, just a little jagged and twisted up. He played the head real simple, melody with his right hand, old-fashioned blues stride with the left. The alien leaned forward. Everyone knew how much they liked Jelly Roll Morton, Duke Ellington, granddaddy music like that.

But when Monk finished out the head the second time, and started improvising on the changes, man, you could see him sitting with this big-assed grin on his face up there at the piano. He started playing some of his really Monkish shit, all that weird, tangled up melody, banging out tone clusters over and over and plunking out his crooked little comping rhythms.

The Frog, when it heard Monk start up with all that, it stood itself up, dropped its cigarettes on the ground and slapped one hand over its huge front face-eyes and the other behind the back of its head. It was moan-

ing—with three or four voices at once—and this blue stuff starting leaking out of its nose. Then it decided it was time to get the hell out.

It wobbled but finally made it out the door, shaky like a junkie dying to shoot himself up. All them hipster cats it came in with, they all followed it out, making out like they were all nervous and worried. Teddy Hill, who was running Minton's Playhouse back then, he followed them all out with a scared face on, too. Bird, he laughed like a fucking maniac when he saw all that.

"Damn Frogs never could handle Monk," Max said, laughing. "Man, that was beautiful!"

A few weeks later, my buddy J.J. came by with this poster he'd found on some lamppost nearby. He read it out to me while I brushed my teeth one morning.

"Now hiring jazz musicians of all instrumental specialties . . . the intergalactic society of entertainers and artists' guild . . . Colored Americans only please, special preference currently given to aspiring bebop players. No re-hires from previous tours please. One-year (possibly renewable) contracts available. See the solar system! Play blues on the moons of Jupiter! Go someplace where The Man won't be breathing down your neck! Press *HERE* for more information!"

I spat out the foam from my toothpaste, put down my electrobrush, and asked, "So? Where's the audition?"

He pressed his finger on the word *HERE* and the sheet went blank for a second. Then a map appeared on it. "Over on West 52nd, at the Onyx."

"What?" I was shocked. Going to the Onyx for an audition, man, that was like going on a tour of Mississippi with a busload of negroes, women and children and all. Over at the Onyx, man, it was all what my father used to call ofays—white men—running the joint, every last one of them so goddamned racist it wasn't even funny.

"You heard me. *The Onyx*."

"Shit. What time?"

"*The Onyx?!?*" That was my woman, Francine. She'd been cooking and she'd come up behind J.J. so quiet we hadn't heard her till it was too late. She looked at J.J. and man, it was like, *No bacon for you this morning, mother—*

She pushed past him, put her hands on her hips, and said, "What are you gonna do? Go on up in space, and leave me alone with this baby?" she said, putting her hands under her big belly.

"Francine," I said.

"No, Robbie, don't try to sweet talk me," she said, shaking her head like she was having none of this. "Goddamn! My mama told me I should stay away from you. Said musicians weren't nothing but trouble."

I looked up at J.J. and tilted my head in the direction of the door, and he just nodded and left us alone. She didn't say nothing till the screen door clicked shut.

"Robbie, baby," she said, looking up at me with those sweet brown eyes of hers. "You are *not* going to that audition at the Onyx," she said.

Man, it just about broke my heart, but I knew that I was done, com-

pletely done with her. I knew she'd be a good mama, but not to my babies. It was all over right then.

So I looked at her, and I said, "I seen those letters you got all wrapped-up. Up in your sock drawer."

"What letters?" she said, and it was almost believable, except I could see she was pretending. Lying.

"Francine, come on, girl. I wasn't born yesterday. Maybe last week, but not yesterday, baby. I know about you and Thornton. And don't be telling me it's some one-sided thing, because I seen how you wrapped them letters up in a ribbon and hid them and all. And I seen the dates on them, too."

She slumped a little, and said, "Baby, I . . ." and then she stopped. She couldn't lie to me no more, and she knew it. She was tired of lying to me, too, I think. She was a good enough woman, Francine.

"Now listen, baby," she said, and her voice cracked but she tried to sound strong just the same. "It ain't like I never heard about you running around with those other women. I know I ain't the only one of us who been unfaithful."

"Francine, you and I *both* know that baby probably ain't mine, the way you been rationing me around here—which is why I *been* with other women, since you don't give me what I need. Did I complain to you? Have I been nagging your ass? No, that's fine, I understand. But this . . . look, you want that baby to have a daddy, you better go marry the man who done gave it to you."

"This is bullshit," she said. "You can run around as much as you want, but *you* can't never get pregnant. Me, I do it once or twice behind your back, and look what I get."

"I know," I said, and I tried to put my arms around her, but she pushed me away. "Life ain't fair, is it, girl?" I said, and tried again. This time she let me hug her. It was breaking my heart, those brown-sugar eyes all full of tears, her arms shaking a little as she hugged me back. But I wasn't gonna have no other man's baby calling *me* daddy, and I wasn't gonna stay with no woman who been going behind my back with no other cat, so it was probably a mistake, me being so nice to her just then like that.

She started crying, saying, "I'm sorry, baby. I'm sorry." Begging and pleading, and kissing on me. She told me she wouldn't never do it again.

"That's good. You learned your lesson. Like you gonna be a good wife to Teddy Thornton," I said. He was the one who'd written her the letters. Used to play drums around town, though I heard his granddad died and he went into business off the money he inherited.

And I tell you, when I said that, it was like the werewolf in them movies, you know, how he changes shape in a second? That was Francine, man. *Bam*. "What, you mean you ain't staying, now, after all that?" Her eyes were full of a kind of fire only a woman can fill up with.

I shook my head. "I'm gonna get this gig, girl. Damn, Bird, and Hawk, and . . . all those cats who gone up there, they come back richer than Rockefeller. You damn *right* I'm going up there."

"You son of a *bitch*!" she yelled, tears still running down her cheeks, and she grabbed a lamp from the hallway just outside the bathroom. "You was gonna run off to space no matter what, wasn't you? God-damn you!"

Then she threw the lamp at me, but I was quick and jumped sideways, so it hit the floor and broke into a million pieces. Man, *that* pissed me off like a mother. It was *my* goddamn lamp, I'd bought it with the money I'd made off gigs, and I knew it'd be good as new in a few hours—it was the new foreign kind that was just coming out then, the kind that could fix itself—but this shit was still just a pain in the ass. I never did like being disrespected by no women.

But I just nodded my head. Didn't matter what she broke, long as it wasn't my horns. I wouldn't need no lamp where I was going.

The Onyx was a nice place, inside. Fancy, I mean. Every cat I knew was in there, plus a few I wished I knew. Sonny Rollins was in there, Red Dog, and Art Tatum, and Hot Lips Bell, and some other cats I recognized too.

We were all outside the green room, waiting. *Green room*, that shit was funny: it'd always been called that, but at the Onyx, during these auditions, it was really the *green* room, with real green Frogs inside. That was where cats went in to play their auditions, and the Frogs would listen and decide whether they wanted them on the ships.

I waited my turn. Everyone was real quiet, more than you'd expect, and through the wall we could hear drums and bass start up every once in a while after guys went in. The bass sounded like one of those expensive self-amplified ones, the kind that looked like a regular bass but got real loud all on its own, except you had to plug it into the wall at night.

Cat after cat went in, played for five or ten minutes, and then left. I sat there with my buddies, Back Pocket and J.J. and Big Jimmy Hunt, and we all just cradled our instruments and watched the TV in the corner of the room, no sound, just color picture, and waited without talking.

Finally, after a few hours of listening and waiting, it was my turn. The door opened, and this skinny white hipster came out and called my name: "Robbie Coolidge?"

"That's me," I said, and I followed him into the room.

There were a couple of Frogs sitting on a couch in there, both of them smoking bouquets of the same damned cigarettes on long metal cigarette holders. They were wearing shades and black suits that didn't hide the bumps they had all over their bodies, and they didn't say nothing to me at all. On the other side of the room, a couple more of them hipsters sat there at a small table with piles of old-fashioned paper on it. Nobody bothered to stand or shake my hand, but one of them hipsters started talking to me. Didn't introduce himself or nothing, just started talking.

"Tenor player." It wasn't no question.

"Yes sir. I can also play the alto and the flute, a little," I said, just as cool as I could.

"You got a manager?"

"Uh, no sir. I, uh . . . I manage myself." I wanted to sound cool, but I felt like a damn country negro right then.

"Well, that's just fine," he said, grinning that white hipster grin of his. "Why don't you play us a song, then?"

So I called the tune, counted it off, and launched into it. The tune I played was one of Bird's, "Confirmation," and I guess their machine knew

it, because as soon as I started playing it, bass and drums were piped in from nowhere. They wanted bebop, so I played my best bebop tune.

"Not bad," the hipster said, and the Frogs were agreeing, nodding. "Can you play anything sweet?" he asked, and I played them a chorus of "Misty" as soulful and pretty as I could.

"That was just fine, Mr. Coolidge. Please leave us your phone number and we'll call you soon. Thanks," the boss man hipster said when I handed him my name card, and one of his sidekicks showed me out. After that, I waited around while my buddies all auditioned, and they all said it'd gone pretty much the same.

I wondered whether that was a good sign or a bad one, but a few weeks later, I was on the subway when my pocket phone rang. I fished it out of my pants pocket, and dialed in my access number on the rotary dial to open the connection.

Looking at the face on the little screen for a second, I wondered why this slick, pale-assed young hipster was calling me, until I realized that it was that same hipster from the Onyx.

"Mr. Coolidge," he said, "I have some good news for you."

And that was how I ended up touring the solar system with Big C.

The space elevator, that blew me away. It was a fucking gas, man. I only ever rode up it once, and I swear it was smooth as Ingrid Bergman's skin, or Lena Horne's smile, even though it was going faster than anything I'd ever been in before.

J.J. Wilson was the only one of my friends who also got a gig up on the Frogships, and he and I sat there side by side with our seat belts around our waists, looking down through the glass floor—it wasn't really glass but we could see through it—at the Earth and everything we were leaving behind. It seemed so strange to be looking at the whole world like that. I could see South America, the ocean, some of Africa. Clouds, and ice on the north pole and south pole. I could see places I've never gone in all the years since then, and probably will never go.

Only a few hours before, J.J.'s wife had driven us up into the Catskills where the Frogs' launchpad had been. She'd cried a little, but soon she was making jokes and small talk. Francine, on the other hand: the first time she called, she was crying, and she pleaded with me on my pocket phone till I hung up on her. Then she called back screaming, and made me listen to her break plates and windows and shit. I'd felt a little lonely on the way up, and a little bad for her, but after that, I was glad she hadn't come along for the ride, and I was sure I'd done the right thing by leaving her.

It was strange, that trip, because I hadn't ever seen the Catskills before. Right there by New York, but I never went and saw them till I was leaving to go to outer space. Can you believe it?

We caught us a jet up there, one that flew on up almost into space, but then come down again in some mountains up in north Brazil somewhere. I was hoping we might stop by in the city, so we could try out some Brazilian chicks. I heard good things about them, Brazilian girls, I mean. But we didn't have time for that—it was straight up to the ships for us.

We weren't the only ones strapped down into chairs in the elevator,

though. There were all kinds of interesting people in there. There were a couple of skinny Chinese girls with some kind of weird musical instruments, what you might call a zither; and there were a bunch of Mexican and white guys dressed like cowboys with spurs and lassos and all that shit, just like in the Hollywood westerns. There was also this Russian cat in a suit who tried to talk to us through some kind of translator machine, but we couldn't understand him at all. He had a satchel of books with him.

And I swear there were about fifteen French girls in there with us, too. Cute, with fine cheekbones and low asses and long-assed legs, dressed up in their can-can outfits. I caught one of them looking at me a few times, and I just smiled and reminded myself to look her up sometime. French women, you know, sometimes they're less racist than American women. They're *ladies*. But you know, women always bring too much shit along with them when they travel. Those can-can girls each had a big stack of suitcases strapped onto the ground beside them, every last one of them.

Me, I just brought my horns, a couple of extra suits, and my music collection, some on vinyl and some on crystal.

When the elevator got to where it was going, we all unstrapped ourselves, got out of our seats, and stepped out into what looked like an airport. I had pulled on my big old herringbone winter coat, thinking it'd be cold in space, but it wasn't. It was like a train station, and as soon as we were in it, I started hearing a beeping sound. The card they'd given me to hang around my neck was beeping. A glowing red arrow pointed to my left, and same for J.J., too. We went off in that direction, following the can-can girls, full of hope and dreams of long legs.

Turned out we'd all been sent up for the same ship. J.J. and me and the can-can girls arrived together in a small waiting room, and the cowboys came a while later. We figured that once the Russian guy showed up, and the Chinese girlies, maybe someone would come and get us, so we just chatted for a while. Turned out the cowboys were rodeo heroes, you know, the guys who ride bulls and catch cows with lassos and shit like that. They'd been hired as entertainers, just like us, one-year contract. Same pay and everything.

Man, ain't nobody in the world back then who paid a black man and a white man and a Mexican and a woman the same money for the same gig—not before them Frogs done it.

So finally, when the Russian and those Chinese chicks showed up, it was because this big tall-assed Frog in a white suit and tie brought them to the waiting room. Like the Frogs I'd seen on Earth, this one was smoking a few black cigarettes on long cigarette holders, all of them poking out of one side of its mouth. It stuck its tongue out and looked at us slowly, one by one, with all of its gigantic eyes on its face and the little ones on its tongue, as if it was checking us against a memorized list of faces.

"Welcome aboard the space station. This way, please, to the ship that will be your home for the next year." It wasn't the Frog itself speaking; the voice came from a speaker on the collar of the Frog's suit. It waved its three-tentacled hand at the wall of the waiting room, and the wall slid open. There was a hallway on the other side, and at the far end of the hallway was another door, far away, slowly opening in the same way.

We went down the hall in little groups, staying close to the people we'd come with. Walking down that hallway, we all looked like old dogs, walked with our heads down, bracing for some bad shit to come down onto us.

But at the end of that hallway, when we came through the second door, you know what we found? Can you guess?

The whole place was done up like a big-assed hotel or cruise ship or something. There was this huge-assed lobby and ballroom, and main stairs leading up and down. One whole wall of the lobby was transparent, you could see right through it to the stars. Frogs wandered every which way, a few cats and fine skinny women of every color here and there, all of them dressed bad, *real* hip.

"Welcome on board The *Mmmhumhhunah*!" Ship name sounded something like that, like how people would talk if they had socks in their mouth or something. That was what the Frogs' language sounded like to me, at least at first. He tried to make it sound like we were guests. "Your navigation stubs should guide you to your places of accommodation. Should you have any questions, please feel free to ask any passing staff member, who can be identified by the subordinate rank uniforms they are required to wear, and which have been modeled on uniforms denoting similar positions in your culture. We will begin preparations tomorrow, and the tour will commence a week henceforth."

"What's he talking about, man?" J.J. asked. His eyes were wide, like he'd seen his grandmama's ghost.

"Follow the little arrow thing to your room," I explained. "If you need help with your bass, ask a bellboy. First rehearsal's tomorrow."

"And please give me your instruments," added the Frog. "They need to be treated specially to withstand both repeated decoherence and space travel."

"Deco-*what*?" J.J. was very protective of Big Mama, which was what he liked to call his bass. "Hey, can you put one of them self-amplifiers into her?"

"Yes, of course, that was already planned," the alien said, and its eyes went round in circles. "Everyone else, also, we must collect your instruments. They will be returned to you tomorrow."

"Awright," J.J. said, twisting his head to one side and the other as he leaned on Big Mama in her carrying case, gave the bass one last hug.

I handed them my tenor sax, but I wasn't happy about it. I didn't know what the hell they was going to do to it, but it was a Conn and had cost me an arm and a leg to get. But I handed it over. I already had the serial numbers written on a piece of paper in my shoe, just in case.

Now, listen up: I know me some drugs. I seen what heroin does to a cat, how it robs him of his soul, turns him into a pathetic junkie. I even tried it once or twice. And I know how spun-around a cat can get on bennies, cause I've done lots of them too. I've drunk every goddamn thing a man can drink, a lot of drinks at the same time, even. I've been so fucked up I didn't know what planet I was on. But nothing fucks you up like the drugs they gave us on the ships.

I first tried them at that first rehearsal, day after we arrived on the

cruise ship, but before we got our own horns back. Me and J.J. showed up at the same time, and met the cat who was running the music program. He was a fat old brother with a trumpet style nobody ever copied right, nobody ever beat, and his name was Carl Thorton, but everyone called him Big C. He gave us these pills to swallow. Three of them, each one a different color.

"Yellow one's so you can blur, the way they like. Blue one fixes you up with a better memory, so you can call up everything you ever heard. That one takes a while to kick in. Last one, the green one, that one's for programming memory of all those licks you memorize into your muscles and shit, instant super-chops. That one comes in real quick. You gotta take these sons-a-bitches every day for six months. Don't forget, or you'll turn your own ass so inside-out it ain't even funny. Got it?"

"Uh huh," me and J.J. said, and took the pills with a big glass of water. Water didn't taste quite right, wasn't nice and a little sweet like back in New York.

Big C, he had a bunch of us new guys—enough to play in a big band. He had us all sit down and listen to the old band, outgoing band, who wouldn't be leaving for a couple of days, so we could listen to them and get the hang of things. He told us big bands only went on tour on the Frogships for a year at a time, most times. Man, I didn't know they was looking to make a big band. I hadn't played in one for years, but whatever. I sat and listened. Didn't figure I could back out then, it was too late.

Well, they started to play—some old Basie tune, I think it was, but they were playing it so fast I couldn't tell which one. Badass, these cats—they didn't drop a beat, not a squeak anywhere. They played the head perfectly at what was definitely three hundred beats a minute or more.

But when the solo section came, I rubbed my eyes and starting worrying about them drugs Big C had gave us. Big C, I could see him fine and clear, but the lead alto saxman, when he stood up and started playing a solo, he started to blur, and he wasn't playing one solo, it was two solos at once. And then four solos, and five, all of them going in different directions at the same time. He had his horn all the way up, leaning back and screeching altissimo, *and* he was hunched forward and honking at the low end of his horn. All of that at the same time, fast lines and slow lines together. He was like a dozen saxophonists in one.

The drummer was slowly going out of sync with himself, blurring into a smear of sticks and flashing cymbals, and when I looked close, I could see the cymbals moving, and staying still, all at the same time. It was one hell of a sight to see, believe me. I tapped J.J. on the shoulder, told him to check that shit out, and he nodded, so I knew I wasn't crazy. It was like ten drummers all playing at once, almost all the same thing, but a little bit off, each one a little bit different. Different cymbal crashes at different times, the downbeat pushed a little forward and a little back all at the same time. But if you listened, in a way, it all fit together somehow. That blew me away.

The rest of the band started playing backgrounds, but they weren't blurry, so the shout chorus came in together—a few beats quiet, then, in unison, *bop!*, then a few bars, then *ba-doo-BOP!* The alto player was play-

ing three-octave unisons with himself. I swear I could see his right hand on the bottom keys, fingers moving and totally still at the same time.

And then the head of the tune came back, but the whole band was a blur, and everything was craziness, like ten, twenty, a hundred big bands trying to play together and coming close but never lining up the downbeats, pushing them forward and back all at the same time, clashing and smashing—it was something else!

It was a new kind of music, man. Real out. Like hearing bebop again for the first time, but multiplied by all the dope in the world.

"Them pills we took, they gonna let us play like that?"

"I suppose so, J.J."

"Goddamn!" he hollered, and "Sheeeeeeeeeee-it!" and "Check these cats out!" all at once, in three different voices, and he started clapping his hands and not-clapping his hands all at the same time.

"Brother, I been living with these Frog-head bastards a long goddamn time, and trust me, shit ain't right with them. You ever look at one closely?" That was Big C.

"Well, yeah," I answered, looking around his room. "They're blurry. Too many eyes."

"Too many eyes? You ever stop and think that we don't have *enough* eyes?" He squinted at me the way Monk used to do to people. "But that blur. . . ! Now, *that's* what I'm talking about!" he said, waving his hands at me. "They're all blurred up, it's like there's a hundred Frogs inside every one of them cats, walking around, doing things. They can't squash themselves into just one person, the way we all just do naturally."

He wiggled his fingers in front of his face like he was showing me what he meant. "And if they're listening to a band, they need the band to blur too, or they just get bored. That's why they like jazz so much! Best goddamn music in the world. 'Cause we make shit up—we improvise. Can't do that with no goddamn Mozart, now can you? Classical music, that just bores these Frogs to death, everything all written out and the same every time, the same even when you blur it."

I was staring at my hands, watching them blur and unblur. It was kind of like taking a piss, you could control it just by thinking about it. Except I was like a little kid, I didn't know exactly how to control it yet, just that I could kind of make it happen.

"You're getting it, Robbie, just relax into it, man. It'll be like natural soon."

"So how long you been on these ships, Big C?" I asked.

He scratched under his chin, back up where his beard was shaved off, and made a face at me. "What year's it now?"

"Nineteen forty-eight."

"Goddamn," he said, "God-damn!" And he got real quiet, and turned his head away so I wouldn't see him cry.

Our schedule for those first few weeks was crazy, all day practicing and then all night jamming our asses off and hanging out in one another's rooms, horns in our hands, LPs going.

One of the craziest things the drugs did was they let us memorize any kind of music we heard. Hearing it was all it took to program it into our heads, well, except it was more like your fingers would remember the tune.

So we would sit there listening to all kinds of LPs, bebop and swing and ragtime and Bach and Stravinsky and Indian music and whatever, and since we all had good ears, and since we could blur ourselves, each blurred self could listen to a different part of the music—the bass line, harmony lines, and the solo on top of it all—so we could come to the end of a record with the whole thing in our heads.

Now, this wasn't so new: I could listen to a solo a couple of times and hold it in my head, but what was strange was that, after a couple of weeks on them alien drugs, I found I could remember any damn tune I wanted, note-for-note. I could call up any one of Bird's recorded solos on "Anthropology"; I could call up a big band playing Monk's arrangement of "Epistrophy" and play the second trombone line on my sax if I wanted. Every line was right there in my head, and in the muscles of my arms and fingers and lips, and if I blurred out and played back that line even once, I could play it again and again, forever, just by deciding to, without even having to think it through.

In other words, them alien drugs made each and every one of us into one-man jazz record machines.

That was why we spent so much time sitting around listening to everyone else's LPs and crystals, a bunch of us cats blurred out of our minds, laughing and telling ourselves to shut up and soaking that shit up, all of it. There were some bootlegs, too, and man, some of them were amazing: "Bird on Mars," one of them was labeled, and that was some crazy, hip, *bad* music. I could listen to that all day long.

But you know, eventually, a cat gets tired of just being around musicians, and he starts wanting himself some jelly. Me, I never had no problem getting me some, women like me and I like them, but it had been a couple of weeks since I'd gotten any, so I decided to go look up them can-can girls and get me some.

I took the elevator down a floor at a time, wandered around till I found them. I saw some crazy-assed sights on the way, too: in one room, there was some kind of Russian circus with these huge blurred-up clowns juggling fire-sticks on the backs of blurry elephants who were dancing to the beat of some scary Russian music. There were all these bears, too, just as blurred as anything, marching around them all. In another room, I saw those rodeo cowboys again, too, riding on blurred-up horses and swinging lassos in a hundred directions at once. But this one guy I saw, he wasn't just blurred, he split from himself, ran in ten different directions at once after a bull that blurred and split up in the same damn way. Some of him caught the bull and roped it, and some of him got stomped by it. One of him even got gored in the stomach by its horns, poor bean-eating bastard.

But finally, I got down about ten floors below our floor, which was under the big-assed lobby. All the signs there were in French, so I knew I was in the right place. I went from room to room, saw a bunch of them blurry Frogs in these salons, smoking their cigarettes and talking in their weird voices while skinny East Indian girls in old-fashioned oriental

clothing served them dainty little white teacups full of funky tea and whatever else Frogs drank.

But finally, I found the auditorium where the girls danced the can-can. That was the orchestra's night off, so the girls were practicing to these crazy recordings of blurred-up can-can music. When I walked in, they were dancing, those French can-can girls, and they was *fine*, all long strong legs going up and down, arms on each other's shoulders. Ain't nothing in the world turns a cat on like seeing women touch each other, except seeing their legs up in the air.

So I sat there and watched their legs go up and down, down and up, scissoring blurs, and I blurred myself too so I could see them clearly. I scanned up and down the line of them, until I found the one I remembered from the elevator, and let her faces burn into my mind.

After they finished, I went and found my way backstage. There was a bunch of green rooms. It was crazy—every girl had her own little green room on that floor. But I didn't know which one she was in, that fine-built woman I picked out from the can-can lineup, so I blurred myself and went up to all the green rooms I could, knocked on every one of them at once.

The door where she answered, I unblurred myself over to that one, and smiled at her with that innocent-country-boy smile like I always used to use on women. She was wearing some kind of silk kimono, you know, one of them Japanese-type housecoats, and her hair was down, and I could hear jazz wafting out from behind. Heard that jazz and I knew that I was *in*.

"You're the one I 'ave seen in the elevator, *oui*? The one who kept looking at me? But why 'ave you come 'ere?"

"Well, I thought about it, and decided I missed you."

She mumbled something in French, something that sounded a little like I'd be needing to try some other can-can girl next, but then she opened the door wide and smiled at me. "Come in, Monsieur . . ."

"Coolidge," I said, and took off my fedora to bow to her all charming, the way women like when you first meet them. "Robbie Coolidge." I stepped into the room, and could hear the music clearly: it was Nat King Cole, "Stardust." Her can-can outfit was draped over the makeup mirror with the light bulbs all around it, huge peacock feathers sticking up above our heads, and I could smell mentholated smoke in the air.

"I am called Monique," she said. No last name then, just Monique. Then she asked, "You would like some coffee?"

"Mmm, yeah, coffee sounds good."

She excused herself for a minute, and when she came back, she had two cups of coffee in her hands.

"You 'ave cigarette?" she asked.

I nodded. "Got a whole pack," I said, and I fished it out of my coat pocket and set it on the table with a pack of matches on top. They were Mercury Barron's Ultras, the new kind that were supposed to make you live longer if you smoked three a day. "Want one?"

"Non," she said, and smiled. "Maybe later."

The coffee was fine, really good French coffee, steaming. Even the god-damn *steam* smelled good. I held the cup and breathed deep and looked at her slipping from her own cup.

"So where you from?" I asked, and she stared at me for a few minutes. She rubbed an eyelid, and a little of the makeup smudged.

"I don't t'ink you really care, do you?" she asked, and sipped her coffee.

"Sure, girl, I care," I lied, and she leaned forward, and blurred herself, and a million breathy whispers of gay *Pa-ree* tickled in my ear.

That ended up being the night the ship took off for Mars, though Monique and I were too busy to notice. We only found out later, when one of the guys in the band ended up wandering into the lobby and noticing the stars were moving, nice and slow, but still moving.

It was a couple of weeks before Monique was in the habit of coming up and listening to the band play, and some of the guys didn't like it. That was when some of the cats in the band were starting to act all high-and-mighty, turning into what my father used to call "political negroes," and taking it upon themselves to tell everyone else how a black man oughtta live.

What made me real sad was that J.J. had fallen in with that pack of nuts. He used to be real nice, real cool and thoughtful. He'd always been a soughful kind of cat, but when he was with them space-Muslim gum-flappers, talking all that nonsense about how the black man was supposed to colonize the solar system for Allah's glory and to show the devil white man and all that, I couldn't stand to be around him. I hated it when he talked that bullshit.

So this one day, between sets, I'm sitting there at one of the tables with Monique and having a nice time. She's drinking wine and I'm having a cigarette and we're talking, and J.J. comes up with this look on his face. I knew it was trouble, that look, and I stood up before he got close, and said, "J.J., I already got one daddy, and he's in Philly, so I don't need you to . . ."

"Robbie, goddamn it, you *listen* to me," he said, and glanced at Monique as if she might leave if he glanced at her the right way.

"Who is 'e?" she asked, standing up.

"Sit *down*, Monique," I said firmly, and she instantly got that look on her face. You know the look: the one women get when you tell them what to do for their own good.

"Robbie, something's going on round here! We gotta cut out, brother! Them Frogs, they been in my room, man! They put something inside my stomach. Like a worm. No, a woman. Yeah, a *woman worm*! She been crawling inside my stomach, screamin', like, '*J.J.! J.J.! Gimme some ice cream!*' Help me, Robbie! I'm fuckin' dying here, man!" he screamed and blurred before my eyes, all his voices screaming at me at once. Poor cat was scared shitless, and he scared the shit out of me, too.

I pushed Monique off to the side and blurred myself, and each of me reached out to one of them blurs of J.J.

"J.J.," each of me said, all together, "Listen, J.J., you sick or something, man. You need to cool it. Cool it *right now*."

He screamed louder, each of him started to shake, and his blurred selves started moving farther and farther apart. I didn't want him to pull me apart like that too, so I quickly unblurred myself, relaxed back into one, and stepped back from him.

A couple of big old bad-assed Frog bouncers smeared themselves out

into an army, and rushed around the room in pairs, grabbing all his blurred selves and hauling them, every last one of J.J.'s selves screaming at the top of its lungs, out one of the exits of the room.

The room went tense and quiet, and many eyes, Frog and human alike, were on me and Monique. Whispering started, and I caught Big C's eye. *Set-break's over, his look said. Back on the goddamn bandstand. Now.*

So I tried to kiss Monique on the cheek—she pulled away a little, but I still got her for a second—and hurried back up with my tenor in hand.

"Apologies everyone!" Big C said into the microphone with a big fake smile on his face. "Show must go on, like they say. Luckily for us, we got a *Mphmnnngi* in the house who's proficient at bass." *Mphmnnngi*, that was what the Frogs called themselves. Then Big C started saying some bizarre sounds, and I thought he was going crazy too, until some stank old Frog in a tight black suit stood up and bowed his big old froggy head at Big C. Then I realized those weird-assed sounds were this Frog's name.

"Come on up and join us!" Big C said, and the Frog came up on stage, picked up J.J.'s bass with his three-tentacled hands, and strummed the strings to check the tuning.

"Goddamn shame," said Winslow Jackson, the alto player who sat beside me on the bandstand. He and Big C were almost the only guys who had toured before. "Seen too many guys end up like that."

"How's that?" I asked, wondering if maybe some of outer space had got into the ship, and fucked with J.J.'s head.

"Must've forgot to take his pills," Jackson said, shaking his head. "It's a damn shame."

Not taking your pills for one day would make you go crazy like that? I ain't never heard of no drug like that, and to this day I'm not so sure it was the pills at all. What if I had took my pills every day and ended up the same as him *anyway*? Poor J.J. I didn't know whether I'd ever see him again, but I didn't have any time to worry about that: Big C was talking to the crowd again, and I had to get ready to play.

"Before we dig into the music, I'd like to share some important news with you! We have arrived at Mars orbit!" Big C hollered into the mike, and behind him, a big piece of wall just suddenly went transparent. Everyone turned to look at the red planet out there, except Big C, who kept talking about how exciting it was to be playing at Mars again, how much he enjoyed it every time.

Mars. We were at *Mars*. That shit blew my mind.

"And now, we have another special guest who's going to join us," Big C said into the microphone.

A short, weird-assed looking Frog got up, a long black bassoon under his arm, and started walking toward us. He was wearing a fine brown suit, tight as a mother, and a brown fedora hat that matched his fern-colored Frog skin. He waved his little tail behind him as he went up to the stage.

"Everyone please welcome Heavy Gills Mmmhmnngn," Big C said. The names were starting to be more and more pronounceable to me, a fact I didn't exactly appreciate.

Big C turned from the microphone and faced us, snapping his fingers on two and four, and loudly whispered, "Stardust." We all got our horns

ready, and he nodded and the rhythm section started us off with a mild blur. We usually played it as a tenor lead tune, meaning it was usually my solo, but of course, when you have a guest feature sitting in, the melody gets played by the guest, so I just improvised harmonies with the other saxes.

The bassoon was awful, like a dog being beat down by a drunk master. It wasn't music. Ain't no other way to say it. He played the whole time blurred up so bad that not a damn thing fit together. The tunes didn't line up right, there was no fugue or harmony or counterpoint that I could find. It was just like a bunch of jumbles laid up on top of one another. I swear, I got dizzy just hearing it. He ended the tune by playing a high E and a high F-natural and a high D-sharp all together, this ugly dissonant sustained cluster that went all through the outro and kept going for two minutes after the rest of the band had stopped playing.

At the end of it, all the Frogs in the audience cheered and groaned and waved their tentacled hands in the air, which was their way of clapping, and I hunkered down for a long night of bullshit.

So J.J., he came back a week later. I saw him drinking coffee in one of the open bars when I came back from window-shopping with Monique in the station dome on Mars. Not that there was anything for me to buy, or that I had any money—that was all waiting for me back on Earth. But there was a lot to see on the station at Mars in those days, and I even picked myself up a real live Mars rock. Still got it, too, at my house.

"Hi," I said to J.J..

He looked up at me and blinked, sniffed the air. "Hello. How are you? I'll see you at rehearsal tomorrow." And then he turned back to his coffee, as if I'd already walked away.

Still, weird as that was, I didn't quite believe it when Big C told me he wasn't J.J. no more. "Might seem like it, might talk like it, but he ain't J.J.," Big C said. "They made some kind of living copy of him, fixed it up all wrong—fixed it up to think more like them than like us—and now he just plain ain't J.J. no more. Just accept it."

Me, I figured that Big C had been on the ships long enough to have lost his mind too. But thinking back on that conversation, I could see that J.J. *was* different. He talked like some kind of white lawyer or something, for one, his voice all stiff and polite. And when time came for the next rehearsal, his playing was dead. There wasn't nothing original in it, no spark. I'd listen along to his bass lines and then go back to my room and listen to my LPs, and I'm telling you, there wasn't a single line he played after he came back that wasn't lifted out of someone else's playing.

But I really knew it wasn't him because of the time I finally saw how he got himself off. He'd been dropping hints, every once in a while, but I never figured it out until one night, when I went to get back some Mingus LP I'd loaned him. I banged on his door, I knew he was in there, but he didn't answer.

So finally I opened the door myself, and there he was on his bed with two Frogs on top of him, tentacles stuck down his throat and wrapped round his legs, slithering their eyed-tongues all over his balls and shit. I slammed the door and just about threw up.

J.J., he had been always as much of a sex-freak as any other cat in any band I played with, and maybe he was so pent-up with all that celibate living that the space Muslims got him thinking he had to do. Maybe his balls got so blue that he lost his mind. But he'd never, ever talked about screwing no Frogs. That was what convinced me, finally, that J.J. was gone.

I found Monique in the lobby a few days after that, staring out the window at the stars. I hadn't seen her around in a week and a half, hadn't gone down to the French floor, but we were already on our way to Jupiter. It was supposed to take a month or two to get out there, and we'd stay for a week or so, or that was what Big C told us. There was a lot to see and do on all the moons, and some shows not to be missed.

"Where you been, girl?" I asked her.

"Busy," she said. "Very busy."

"Doin' what?" I asked her, as innocently as I could.

"One of our girls, she is sick. She was taken away by *les grenouilles*," she said, and made a face.

"Must've forgot to take her pills," I said, almost to myself.

"Euh? Quoi?" Monique said. She surprised me. I looked at her. "*Que distu?*"

"I said, she must have forgotten to take her pills. Like what happened to J.J."

"Non," she said. "One of the alligator . . ."

"Frogs . . ." I corrected her.

"Frog, oui, *les grenouilles*, one of the 'frog,' e ask 'er to come to 'is rooms, and she say *non*, and next day she become very sick." Suddenly I could see J.J. in my head with those tentacles in his mouth and wrapped around his legs. I couldn't stand to think about all that again.

"But baby, you're okay, right?" I took her hand.

She turned and looked at me with those eyes of hers, green like Chinese jade. "I want to go 'ome," she said, and squeezed my hand. "I don't know 'ow you can t'ink you are falling in love on a Frog ship. I don't know 'ow anyone can believe in love in a 'orrible place like this."

"Baby, come with me," I said to her.

"Oui, I will come with you. But I will not love you, Robbie," she said, and squeezed my hand a little. "And *you* must not love *me*, either," she said.

And then she turned her head and looked out at all them stars for a little while more.

The month we spent traveling out to Jupiter passed so goddamn fast, all blurred awkward sex and blurred awkward music and J.J. all sad and serious up there on his bass, and that dumb, stank-ass Frog Heavy Gills Mmmhmnngn sitting in on his sad-assed bassoon at least once a week. The band still played like a well-oiled machine, still hit every note exactly right, but there was something going wrong, and I think we all could feel it.

And then one day, right in the middle of our show, Big C does that hamming-up thing that he was always so good at, and the wall went all transparent and I swear, Jupiter—fucking *Jupiter*—was right there in front of us covering the whole window. It looked like a giant bowl of vanilla ice

cream and caramel and chocolate sauce all melted together and mixed up, with a big red cherry in the middle of it. It was big, man, biggest thing I ever saw, with these little moons floating around it. I couldn't breathe for a second. I looked out into the audience for Monique, but she wasn't at the table I'd left her at. Too bad, she would have loved to see Jupiter like that, right *there* in front of us.

"Now, as you all know, the orbit of Jupiter is a special place, a place where many people travel and choose to stay because it's so beautiful. While you're here, you should all go down to Io and use this opportunity to see some of the greats of jazz, people like Charlie Parker, Lester Young, Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, Cab Calloway, Johnny Hodges . . . don't miss them." When I heard that, I couldn't believe my ears. Bird? How could they have Bird up here, when I'd seen him in New York? Had he come back for another tour? I had no idea how that could be. I didn't think it through so good, though, then. My mind went right on back to that *other* name: Lester Young.

"Now," Big C said, "in honor of the jazz mecca that we're at, we're going to play a little tune called 'The Jupiter's Moons' Blues.'"

He counted us in, four, five, four five six seven, and what do you know but that damn Frog's bassoon started up again with the head. By then I swear I would have broken the thing over Heavy Gills Mmmhmnngn's head if I ever got the chance, I'd heard so much of it.

There was all kinds of cool shit to do on them moons, submarine trips on Europa and Ganymede, volcano jumps on Io; they even let us humans ride along in these special ships that could drop down into the atmosphere of that badass old Jupiter himself and see the critters that the Frogs had transplanted there from some planet near where they came from.

But none of that interested me. Some of the guys in the band, they told me, "Robbie, man, what you doing missing a chance to see all this fine shit?"

"Man, all I wanna see," I told them, "is Lester Young. I'm gonna go see the Prez."

The club on Io was small, quiet. The Frogs didn't get interested in jazz until sometime after they'd checked out everything else that their people had done on Jupiter and the moons, and since ours was the only cruiser to show up for a while, right away was the best time to go in and check out the Prez.

That's what we called Lester Young, "Prez," because he used to be—and according to me up till that day, still was—the President of the Tenor Saxophone. Man, that sound. I'd seen him in New York a few times, and a bunch of times in Philly too, and he always had it, that thing, what Monique always called *je ne sais quoi*, which means *who the fuck knows what?* Man, before the war, Prez always had that up there in his sweet, sweet sound.

So anyway, Monique and me, we ended up in this little club in a bubble floating over Io. There were these big windows all over where you could look out onto the volcanoes spitting fire and smoke and shit. There was even one of them windows in the club, and Monique kept looking out of it.

Prez wasn't playing when we got there, it was too early so some other

cats were on the bandstand. Trio of guys, didn't know their names but I was pretty sure I'd met the pianist before. They were all right. Sometimes cats like Prez, man, they did even better with those plain bread-and-butter rhythm sections, playing that kind of old swing style. It was all about *his* beautiful voice, *his* sound. Waiting for Prez, I could hear his tenor sound, man, that touch of vibrato, that strong gentle turn in his melody riding his own beat, just a little off of the bass, you know what I mean.

Monique started to get bored. I could tell. She fiddled with her hair, looked out at the volcanoes.

"Baby, Prez should be on soon," I told her.

She frowned at me, that sexy baby-I'm-pissed-off kind of frown. "I want to go for a walk. See the bubble." We'd passed some nice shop windows and cafes out there, and I guessed she really just wanted to go shopping. But it also felt a little bit like a test, and I never in my life let no woman test me.

"You go on and go shopping if you want, but me, I ain't gonna miss Prez for the world. Not a tune, not a single damn note."

"Fine," she said, and adjusted her purse. "I'll be back later. Maybe," she added with a pout, and turned on her high heel and marched out, adjusting her hair as she went, and wiggling her ass because she knew I was checking it.

I didn't give a shit, man. French can-can girls you can get any old time if you really want one, but there wasn't nowhere to see Lester Young except on Io. This was my last chance to see him in my life, unless he came back to Earth, and he'd been in bad shape the last time I'd seen him.

Well, I ended up sitting there through a half hour of mediocre rhythm section ad lib, sipping my Deep Europa Iced Tea—that's what they called a Long Island Iced tea in that place, the only drink I could afford—when finally Prez showed up.

Now, seeing Prez that time, hearing him play, it was kind of like the first time you had sex. I don't mean waking up from a dirty dream and finding your bed's all sticky, neither. I mean the first time you're with some girl a year ahead of you in junior high school, and you go on upstairs in her house when her mama's out and maybe you kiss on her a little and then you put it in her, and a minute or two later you're wondering what just happened and is that it and why everyone is always making a big deal about that shit?

It was a shame and a huge letdown, is what I'm trying to say.

Prez, he used to be a *little* fucked-up. Not when he was younger, before the war. Back then, that cat had some kind of magic power, man. People always wanted him to play like Hawk, I mean Coleman Hawkins, but he didn't listen to nobody, he played his own sound, and it was beautiful. He had this way of making melodies just *sing*, so sweet it'd break your heart in half.

But then they sent him to war, and seeing as he was black, they never put him in the army band. *Just who exactly do you think you are, boy? Glenn Miller? Off to the front line with you, nigger*, that's how it was. Folks said it wasn't surprising, him not having his head on straight after all that happened to him: being sent to fight in Europe, and what he saw in Berlin after the Russians dropped that bomb they got from the Frogs onto the city. How he got stuck in a barracks in Paris for all that time af-

ter, fighting the local reds, and what happened after we pulled out of Europe, where they court-martialed his ass because his wife was a white woman and he didn't take shit off the other soldiers for it. After all that, they said that something inside him was broke, broke in a way that couldn't never be fixed.

Well, you know, I was hoping that maybe the Frogs had somehow fixed him up, like they'd done with Bird. When I seen him, standing tall, cleanest cat you ever seen, with a big old smile and a fine suit and the same old porkpie hat he always wore, I started to think maybe they'd done the world a service, brought back the President of the tenor saxophone.

So anyway, he lifted that horn of his up to his lips, with the neck screwed in a little sideways, so that the body of the horn was lifted up off to the side the way he always used to do, and as he started to blow "Polka-dots and Moonbeams," my heart sank.

It didn't sound like the real Lester Young, not the Prez I knew. It sounded like some kind of King Tut mummy Lester Young sound. Like the outside *shape* of his sound was still there, but that something important inside it had been took out. I'm sure nobody else there could hear it, but I could. I knew it right away.

I could feel my heart splitting in two as I just sat there and watched the Prez, the man who'd been the Prez, drift his way through tune after tune. It was all right, that floating sound of his, the way he always waltzed loose with the rhythm, the sweet tone, the little bursts forward and then the cool, leaning-back thing he'd do after it. But there was something missing.

Then it hit me what was wrong. I knew every last one of the solos he was playing. Not the tunes, I mean, not just the heads and changes. I mean I knew every goddamn note he played. He wasn't improvising at all. Everything, every lick, was from his old recordings. "My Funny Valentine"; "I Cover the Waterfront"; "Afternoon of a Basieite" . . . Every god-

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damn note was off one of his old pre-war LPs. He was playing it all exactly the way he'd played it in the studio, at live shows, anywhere he'd been recorded. I knew, because I had all them same recordings up in my head, too, every last one of them.

So I just sat there staring at him with tears in my eyes, and waited for it to be over.

But you know, during the first set break, he came over and sat with me. Of all the people he could have sat with, all the people who'd come to Io just to see him, he came and sat with me, probably the only cat in the place who was disappointed with what he'd heard.

"You're a saxophone player, aren't you, young man?" he said, suave as ever but a bit too cool. He must've seen me eyeing his fingers on the horn.

"Yes sir, I am. I'm from Philadelphia, and my name's Robbie Coolidge."

"Might you happen to be a tenor player by any chance?"

"Yes sir," I said, nodding.

"Mind if I join you here? Seeing as you lost your hat and all," he said, hand on the back of a chair. By "hat," he meant Monique. Everyone knew that was the way Prez talked, funny names for everything. "Hat" was a new one, though. "My 'people' are in need of a little rest, is all," he said, and wiggled his fingers. That was what he called his fingers, his "people."

And of course I told him I didn't mind, and offered to buy him a drink and he laughed and said now that all the drinks were free for him, he didn't want no liquor no more. And then he just started talking to me. Asked me how old I was, asked me if I missed my mama's cooking—I didn't, my mama was a terrible cook, she used food as a kind of weapon when she was mad at me, but I didn't tell him that—and then he told me about his own mama's cooking.

I don't remember exactly what he said, honestly; what I remember was his careful, quiet smile and his bright big eyes lit by some exploding volcano out the big dome window, and how goddamned happy he seemed to be remembering his mama in the kitchen, the smells and the flavors coming back to him across all those years and all those miles from when he'd sat at the kitchen table waiting for dinner.

And don't ask me how I knew, but right then, I realized that they'd done to him whatever they'd done to J.J. and to Bird, and that Lester Young, whoever he was, he was gone from the world, same as J.J. and maybe same as Bird, even. All that was left of the Prez was a shell, a filled with something that was supposed to be him but wasn't. That was what I was talking to, and it was all I could do not to cry in his face.

At the end of the set break, when he got up to play again, he told me, "Get off the ships, son. Get yourself on back to the Apple Core," which was what he'd started calling Harlem after the war. "You're way too young for this kind of life."

A little while after he started to play again, Monique came in, and I just took her by the hand and we left.

"Listen, you jive-assed negroes, just listen to me for a minute! This shit they got us playing, man, it ain't jazz! I don't know what the fuck it is, but it ain't human music. Jazz is for *humans*, my brothers!"

Some of them Muslim brothers were nodding their heads as I said this, but I knew one or two of them who wasn't going to go along with this so easy.

"Boy, you all wet. You signed a god-damned contract." It was Albert Grubbs, just like I expected. I forget the Muslim name he'd gone and taken for himself, but anyway, I knew him as Albert Grubbs, and sure enough, a few years later, everyone else did too, once he dropped all that religious bullshit. But right then, he was dead against us doing anything to upset relations with the Frogs, because he was still big on the whole space Muslim thing at the time. They figured if we was good enough Uncle Toms, the Frogs might give us some ships of our own, and let us fly around the solar system, so we could brag about beating white people to it. He looked about ready to start quoting the Koran or Mohammed or something like that, so I stood up. I wasn't gonna rehearse no more till we talked it all out.

"Yeah, I signed a contract. *You* signed a contract, too. You know who *else* signed him a contract? J.J.—And look at him now!"

Everyone turned and looked at him. And he was just polishing his bass, oblivious, and he turned and said, "What?"

"Everyone *knows* he ain't the same. Don't matter if you never met him before he got on this ship. He used to be goofy and funny and clean, man, took care of his ass. Now look at him," I said, and cleared my throat. "Hey, J.J.," I called out, "What's your favorite movie? What's your favorite kind of ice cream?"

"Shut up, man," he said. His voice sounded deader than the worst junkie's. "Leave me alone."

Grubbs had a sour look on his face, and he was shaking his head, but some of the other space Muslims, they were nodding and mumbling to one another. Wasn't none of them gonna colonize nothing if they all ended up like J.J.

"See? See that? I'm telling you," I said. "The longer we stay on . . ."

". . . the more of us end up like J.J." It was Big C, nodding his fat bald head. "The kid's got a point. I done something like six tours of the solar system, and one quick trip out to Alpha Centauri, too, and you know, there's always one or two guys who get messed up like that, sometimes more. Lately, it's been more like three or four guys a trip. I've been startin' to wonder when my time's gonna come."

This started the guys murmuring, discussing, disagreeing.

Grubbs and this other older guy, another space Muslim I remember was calling himself Yakub El-Hassan, one of the trombone players, they stood up to start preaching. I knew I had to do something quick.

"Hey, Big C," I said. "Tell me, you know anything about what happened to Charlie Parker?" Not even Grubbs had the guts to interrupt Big C.

And that was the story that turned the tide. Bird, man, Bird had been right there on that same ship as we were on, at least that was how Big C told it. He'd gone off dope but was still drinking like a fish, whiskey and wine, still eating fried chicken by the five-pound serving, still smoking three packs of cigarettes a day, all of which, especially the liquor, was killing him.

"They took him away, and some of what they done to him, some of it gave him back what he lost back in Camarillo, that's for sure. But what they did to him was even worse, killed off whatever was left from before

Camarillo. Bird, man, he was ruined, all busted up inside. All he could do was play shit off records. Now, he played it crazy and slant. It was beautiful for what it was. But still, that was all he could do anymore. And to tell the truth, I heard they got copies of him. Extras, so they could have him around later. That whatever they took out of him, they kept it for the copies."

The guys were all scared, then, all confused, and I knew finally I could maybe change their minds. Even Grubbs looked like he was starting to have his doubts, starting to feel like maybe we did have to make a stand.

"Man, you gotta think about it this way. They ain't gonna copy nobody who don't play what they like," I said. "I mean, is this any better than slavery? Having your body copied and the most important part of you carried out into space? Your *soul*?" I said, hoping space Muslims believed in souls.

"Okay, so what can we do? Stop playing?" asked Yakub, still defiant, and though even Grubbs finally looked like he was ready to do something, he was nodding as if to say, *Yeah, what can we do?*

"Nuh-uh," I said. "We stop playing, maybe they leave us on Jupiter or something. So we keep the contract. We play, but we play shit they *don't* like. You never know, they might even drop us off at home early. And the only thing I ever promised when I signed up for this was that I'd play jazz, man."

"I'm liking the sound of this," Big C said, nodding his head. "Anything in mind?"

"Oh yeah, I got something in mind. Let's go back to my place," I said. "I got some LPs for us to listen to, some new tunes to learn."

Big C grinned his big old emcee grin and looked out into the crowd of Frogs. "Welcome, ladies, gentlemen, and whatever else you might happen to be. We're glad to be back on the bandstand after our week off at Jupiter. We've got a whole new repertoire lined up for you, which we've worked hard to get ready, and we just know it's gonna make a big splash. Welcome back, and remember: *we're* the house band for the rest of this tour."

Then he turned and faced the band, snapping his fingers one, two, one two three four, and then Jimmy Roscoe started the tune with a solo on the piano. "Straight, No Chaser," it was, that night; my favorite Monk tune.

The band came in after a couple of bars, and not a goddamned one of us

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blurred. It wasn't just that we were playing Monk, but we didn't even blur when we played it. That made them crazy. The arrangement was lifted right off a Monk piano performance, the brass clanging out the tone clusters, and the saxes singing out his jagged solo in unison.

I never saw a roomful of Frogs clear out so fast, man. Not at first, of course; most of them waited until we segued into "Trinkle Tinkle" and they couldn't stand it no longer. When aliens got sick off Monk, sometimes they even *puked*. It wasn't pretty. Man, one of the most beautiful things I ever saw in my life was old Heavy Gills slipping on some purple alien puke on the way out, falling right on his bassoon and snapping it in half. I still don't know what it was about Monk that always turned them upside down like that. Even Monk didn't know. Later, after I got back, I told him—Monk—about that night, and it cracked him up. He said some scientist had come and seen him, with some kind of theory, equations and charts and numbers, but he told me he figured the answer was a whole lot simpler than that. "It's just a gift," he said, and he winked.

Anyway, the trip home, man, it was a lot quicker than we expected. We just played a few Monk tunes at the start of every set, and the few Frogs who even bothered to show up left quick and then we had the ballroom to ourselves. For a while, we started playing around with what we could do in music without blurring. We could still make our fingers remember anything, could still remember any music we'd heard since going on board. I'm still that way, all these years later. I got so many goddamn tunes in my head, it's like a music library, even now.

But of course we didn't just work all the time. We jammed, and most of us (except the few who were still trying to be space Muslims) drank all night, and started bringing in the can-can girls—I'd talked Monique into stirring them up, and you know, they were French. They love their revolutions. So they was refusing to blur during their can-can dances, and their auditorium was just as empty as our ballroom, and they had all the time in the world to come drink and hang around with us. All those French girls around, tempting our Muslims from their righteous path and fooling around with the rest of us, it was like heaven for a while.

I think the only people who blurred anymore were the cowboys, because most of them were having the times of their lives chasing those blurred-up cows around all blurred up themselves like that. And some of the animals in the Russian circus, because they didn't know any better. And maybe that Russian guy, too, though him and the Chinese chicks I never did see again.

So anyway, we were supposed to have gone out to Pluto, but a few days off Jupiter, the complaints got so bad that Big C was called up to go see the man—I mean the Frogs running the ship—but when he came back, he said the Frogs agreed we was playing jazz, just like in the contract, and the contract didn't say nothing about no Monk, so there was nothing they could do. I half expected them to start lynching our asses, but they didn't. The ship went ahead and turned around, headed for Earth just as fast as it fucking could. Me and Monique, we had a fine old time partying the nights away, night after night, but we knew this trip wasn't gonna last forever.

"Marry me," I said to her one night when we were lying in bed, both of

us smoking. I wasn't sure I meant it, wasn't sure I wanted to marry anyone at all, but it sounded like the thing to say.

"Robbie," she said, "I know you. You are *musicien*. You don't need a wife. You are like a bluebird in the sky."

I puffed on the cigarette. "I guess you're right, baby."

"Let's enjoy the time we 'ave, and when we get 'ome, we don't say good-bye, only 'See you around the later.'"

I laughed a little. "Naw, you mean, 'See you later.' Or 'See you around,' baby. Not . . ."

"Whatever," she said, and yanked the sheets off me.

You know, when we got to Earth, we landed in Africa.

Africa, man, the motherland, the place where all our music started. I was in Africa and the funny thing was, I didn't give a shit. I wanted to get back to New York, to the clubs on West 52nd, to Minton's.

But it took time. We came down an elevator near some city whose name I can't remember, in what was then still the Belgian Congo, which was lousy with wealthy Belgian refugees by then, and we rode down into town in jeeps. Monique sat with me, held my hand, but I couldn't see her face through the sunglasses she wore. She had this big sun hat on, too, huge thing I'd never seen before, and she kept looking out across the hillsides.

Finally, when we got into the city, that was it. I lifted her suitcase out of the back of the jeep, and there we were, the guys from the band off to one side, waiting for me so we could all catch a flight back to New York, and all them can-can girls off to the other side waiting for her so they could all go back to Paris.

And there we were in the middle.

"What you gonna do?" I said.

"I am not coming to New York," she said.

"I know. What *are* you gonna do?"

"I am going to go to Paris," she said, but the French way, *Paree*. "I'm going to tell people what I 'ave seen, and ask everyone to stop cooperating wit' *les grenouilles*." Which was exactly what she did, too, on and on until the Frogs finally just up and left. Not that they left because of her, I don't think, but she never stopped fighting them.

"That sounds good," I said, and I looked at her hands.

"'Ow about you?" she said, a little more softly.

"Me? I'm a musician, Monique. I'm gonna go home and play me some music."

I kissed her, and I wanted that kiss to be magic, like in the stories your folks read you when you're a little kid. When a kiss wakes up a princess or saves the world, that kind of shit. But all that happened was that she kissed me back for a little while, and then she was gone.

It was a hell of a thing, getting back to New York like that. Not just all the new buildings, or them new flying cars zipping around like they owned the place, crashing into one another. The goddamned Frogs, they were pissed at all of us from that tour. Those sons of bitches over at the Onyx, they had already tore up all the contracts, and I didn't ever see

more than a few thousand dollars from the whole thing, which was bullshit, really, since I'd signed up for a cool million, and been gone for almost half the time I'd signed up for.

But you know, in the end, I didn't give a shit. Those pills I took, none of them had worn off yet. (Most of them still haven't, even now, and it's been decades.) My mama, she used to say, "Take whatever lemons you get in life, boy, and you go on and make yourself some lemonade." My mama, she couldn't cook to save her life, but she knew something, all right.

So I started making lemonade. I got myself one of those new type-writer-phones that everyone was buying, and sent a phone-letter to my buddies from the band, and on Monday nights, we started meeting down under the 145th Street Bridge.

Man, down under that bridge, with them new flying cars buzzing overhead, we invented a new kind of music. It was all about playing together, at the same time, like in old-fashioned Dixieland music, except that we were swinging it hard, *real* hard, and half of it was made of chunks of music from the libraries in our heads. Everyone who showed up there, we'd been up on the ships, so we all had libraries in our heads. Our fingers were programmed, you know, so we could play anything back that we wanted. You could start with a little Monk, then switch over to Bird, throw in a little Prez, and of course there was room for whatever else you wanted to play up in there, too, and *man* did we play.

All that memory and all those programmable chops that they gave us to make up for the fact that playing blurred was so hard, we used all of that. After a few months, we found none of us could blur anymore even if we wanted to, but we didn't even care. We were doing something new, man, and all the music that's come after, you can hear some of what we did right in there, still!

Time came years later when all of that would start to sound old-fashioned, when people would start talking shit about us for that, criticizing us for ever having gone onto them Frogships and even blaming us for what happened in Russia and Europe, which is just crazy. Man, when we were fighting back, that was the first time ever where anything like that had been done, at least with the Frogs. It was all new. It's easy to disrespect people making mistakes before you were born, way easier than worrying about not making your own mistakes. That's just bullshit, trying to fill us up with regret for what's all long gone now, like the Frogs.

Shit, maybe there *are* things I regret, like leaving Francine the way I did, or how I totally stopped visiting J.J. in the asylum after we got back. But most of my regrets are for things that ain't my fault. I regret seeing Prez the way he ended up, for instance, and I regret never seeing Big C again, and Monique for that matter. I used to think about all that a lot, after I first got back. Man, I remember lots of times when I used to stand there under the bridge while everyone was playing back all their favorite lines from old records we all knew, and I'd look up into the sky and find Jupiter. It's easy, you know, just look up. It looks like a star, a bright old star up there. I'd stare on up at Jupiter, back then, and think of Prez, and blow a blues on my horn, the baddest old mother of a blues that anybody anywhere ever heard in the world. ○

# THE WOMAN UNDER THE WORLD

Steven Utley

Steven Utley's Silurian tales, launched in *Asimov's* in 1993, now number almost three dozen and have also appeared or are about to appear in *F&SF*, *Analog*, the UK-based *Postscripts*, *Sci Fiction*, *Revolution Science Fiction*, the online edition of *Cosmos Magazine* (based *Down Under*), and Peter Crowther's *We Think, Therefore We Are* anthology, forthcoming from DAW Books. The author also has an anthology that he co-edited with Michael Bishop, *Passing for Human*, that has just come out from PS Publishing.

**T**he pod splits open with a hiss, and the glowing being steps out, looks about itself in confusion, takes it cannot say how long to understand what it is seeing, though it could not have said why what it sees is all so puzzling. It finds itself at one end of a chamber hewn from solid rock and braced with timbers. Behind it, the pod lies against the wall like a smashed tomato. Ahead, at the angle of a bend, it makes out the shapes of a large television screen and a battery of monitoring devices, including a television camera mounted on a tripod. Behind this array is a metal door. As vision continues to improve, a man's face appears on the television screen. His mouth moves, the glowing being knows the man is speaking, but nothing can be heard. It wants, and tries, to say, *What the hell's going on here? Where the hell am I?* but cannot be certain that it succeeds in uttering even the most inarticulate sounds. No, wait, the man on the screen flinches—response. So it has done something, not sure what, but something. The man looks offscreen and shakes his head. Then another face, a woman's, crowds into view and she, too, speaks soundlessly. The glowing being takes a step forward, and the expressions on both faces onscreen become alarmed. The man gestures unmistakably, *stop, move back, stay back*. The glowing being steps backward and notices a wide yellow and

black stripe painted across the floor, just in front of its (are those *my?*) toes. The stripe's meaning is clear: This Far And No Farther. It looks at the television screen and nods, and now it realizes that the screen, the monitoring devices, and the metal door are reflected in a large mirror set in the angle of an L-shaped chamber. The real articles are at the far end of the other arm of the L, or perhaps even reflected through a series of mirrors set in the corners of a tremendous series of L-shaped chambers. The image of mirrors stretching toward infinity is dizzying. The glowing being staggers to the left, extends a hand to steady itself against the wall, sees or feels or in any event is aware of fingers burning into the rock like poking soft cheese. Draws back and astonishedly regards four smoking holes in the wall. Its gaze gradually travels up and across the wall, to dull gray metal housings mounted high, like wasps' nests. Pipes of the same metal extend from these housings along the juncture of wall and ceiling, around the bend of the L, through all the bends of the Ls, and disappear into sockets set above the metal door. More monitoring devices, it decides, shielded with lead, shielded cables. An abandoned mine or an unfinished section of some supersecret subterranean military complex buried deep inside some mountain. Yes. It's all starting to make sense, finally. Look at the screen, at the man and the woman. The man seems to be pleading. For what? Logically, for calm and patience. Be calm, be patient. Whatever the hell this is all about, we're working on it. Yes. That's probably it. The man nods back, and then his face and the woman's collapse into a white dot at the center of the screen. The glowing being stands at its end of the chamber, on its own side of the yellow and black stripe And No Farther, and waits for it knows not how long.

Then the woman reappears onscreen and says, "Sorry about the accommodations," and the glowing being realizes without surprise, I can hear now. "We're preparing a facility for you. It'll be more comfortable. And safer. Safer for everybody. Meanwhile, this is the best we could do on short notice."

I know you, thinks the glowing woman (by now the glowing being has determined that much about itself, she is in fact a woman), and she says, "Micol" (for she has finally recognized Micol), "Micol," and, yes, unsurprisingly, that is her voice, "Micol, what—"

Micol flinches at the sound of her name, adjusts something at her end, announces, "That's better." She makes an elaborate business of examining the console at that end and avoiding eye contact at this end. She says, "You understand that it'll be best if you stay behind the yellow line there, don't you? We, uh, we don't want you frying the electronic equipment."

"Micol, what am I am doing here? Where *is* here? What happened?"

"We're trying to find out. Believe me." Micol's lips compress for a moment. "But this is so—you just have to be patient. Try and be patient. Please."

"Tell me what happened."

"There was an accident. No, I mean an incident."

"Well, one or the other, something's wrong with this picture. I'm supposed to be—the last thing I remember is the jump station, the tech counting down. What happened?"

"The chief'll tell you about it when he gets here."

"But where is *here*?"

But Micol doesn't answer the question, and the chief, when he comes onscreen, looks haggard and frightened, with eyes sunk in bruised-looking flesh. He says, "I'm going to make this as simple as I know how. I told you in the first briefing that the spacetime anomaly is essentially where Point A and Point B happen to come together. But, more exactly, they approach each other. They're separate points and always remain separate points no matter how closely they approach each other. There's always going to be an infinitesimal gap between them, possibly less than a Planck unit, right down at the level of quantum foam. But, still, a gap. Till now, objects, animals, people've all gone through without mishap. But we think Point A and Point B somehow got out of alignment on this particular occasion—when Phyllis Lewis tried to go through. Because of the misalignment, she didn't go through."

The glowing woman says, "Why are you referring to me in the third person?"

"Listen carefully. Phyllis Lewis didn't go through, she's safe, no need to worry about her, but something else *did* go through. Whenever something goes through the spacetime anomaly, it produces a sort of echo, you might even call it a ghost. After-images, except that they aren't images, really, but electromagnetic shadows. Whatever goes through creates a sort of template, and for the briefest instant afterward there's something left. Sort of a free-standing, highly localized anomaly in its own right. In this case, it's been given definition by the *idea* of Phyllis Lewis. It thinks it is Phyllis Lewis."

"Well," says the glowing woman, in a flash of Phyllis Lewis' inimitable humor, "isn't that a kick in the teeth!"

By now the glowing woman has determined that she is myself, Phyllis Lewis, some approximation thereof. No: I am, I was, I am this person. I know everything she knew, remember everything she remembered.

I remember being shown one of the biological specimens the robot probe had brought back through the spacetime anomaly, remember looking at it blankly, asking, What is it? "Look at it," I was told. I *am* looking at it, I said, it looks like enough sushi for a family of six. "*Look* at it, Phyl!" I'm a tech, I protest, not a marine biologist. "Oh, come on, Phyl, think back to your books about prehistoric times. Here's a marine arthropod with a trifurcation running the length of the body, cephalon, thorax, pygidium—" The tone of voice compelled me to look at the creature more carefully. Then, of course, I realized what it was and even why I hadn't recognized it: it wasn't the kind of thing you expected to see in fresh condition. I said, incredulously, Jeez, it looks like a trilobite. "Yeah." But they all went extinct hundreds of millions of years ago. "Yeah." But—! "*Yeah*."

I remember being asked to join an advance team that would go through the spacetime anomaly, to the world that lay at the other end or on the other side or wherever, whatever it was.

I remember going to Port Aransas on the coast for a weekend getaway with my husband—"our last chance," he called it, "for four hundred mil-

lion years." We had rented a beach condo and arrived late in the afternoon, just as a storm broke; the ferry got us across the shipping channel a beat or two ahead of driving rain, howling wind, lightning, and thunder. A thick smell of insecticide practically smacked us in the face when we opened the door. Our choices were to endure it or go huddle in the car; we chose to endure. The condo was furnished in Early Indifferent, everything shading back and forth between beige and blah, upholstery, carpet, walls, reproductions of two landscapes and one still life. It barely qualified as décor at all. We turned the fans on high in hopes of dissipating the smell and unpacked and made do while the storm blew itself out. The rain had stopped by dawn the following morning, and the overcast was breaking up. Although the fans had run all night long, the smell seemed undiminished in its potency; we tried opening all the doors and windows, but the insecticide smell finally drove us out of doors. Not that we really minded being out of doors. I proposed a walk on the beach; we could make our way around to the town when we got hungry. There were cacti and little yellow blossoms among the dune grass, and small lizards and a huge ant bed on the path itself. A bumblebee crossed in front of us, then an orange butterfly. We marveled, and I said, You don't expect to find *bugs* at the beach, and my husband said easily, "The insecticide should've been enough of a clue." We emerged from the dunes and held hands like teenagers as we walked along the beach. Where vehicles hadn't packed it down the dark rain-dimpled sand looked as fine and crumbly as brown sugar. Shells and pieces of shells and tangles of orange-brown seaweed lay everywhere, gulls wheeled overhead, sandpipers ran through the foam. A small diving bird I couldn't identify repeatedly plunged headfirst into the surf. Among the foraging wading birds was another I didn't know, some kind of heron or crane, and I resolved privately to brush up on my shore birds. I also saw a darting sand-colored crab no bigger around than my thumbnail, the mouths of filter feeders' dens, and a stranded Portuguese man-of-war. Nothing existed at this end of the island that wasn't geared to the wants of tourists and the needs of those who catered to tourists, but across the channel on the mainland lay another world entirely, a landscape littered with petro-industrial hardware. Visible from the island, against a backdrop of cranes and oil storage tanks, an immense rig for offshore drilling operations lay on its side like some child Titan's discarded toy. Out to sea, a long low ship glided like a phantom across the rim of the horizon, and I could just barely see two upright rigs. Come on, I said, there's a little pagan ritual we must perform here. We kicked off our sandals and waded into the cool water up to our knees, stood feeling the wave action suck sand out from under our heels; he dipped his hand into the water, brushed his fingers across my face, and I ran my tongue over my lips and said, We've lived inland too long. I was excited, happy, and I felt I wanted, needed, to say more, perhaps something about the irresistible call of the sea, how the sea flavors our blood, but I felt too self-conscious. And then I noticed tears in his eyes. Darling, darling, I asked, what is it?

Curiously, though, as my sense of identity sharpens, my sense of being

in a real place diminishes. In a dream strange things may happen in accordance with some strange or even indiscernible logic. You can accept a dream on its own terms up to a point beyond which an element of the dream becomes off-putting and you suddenly reject the dream. You remember that an important character in the dream is dead or that a certain activity or situation is simply impossible. And you awaken.

Then perhaps I am awakening. If I look away from the walls of my prison, they vanish, and the monitors, too, and everything else, and then when I look at them again they are there, but somehow less convincingly so.

I tell myself, Think this through now. Do you really believe that material things don't exist if you aren't looking directly at them? Or thinking about them? Perhaps the question needs to be inverted: Do you believe the things you are looking at and thinking about actually exist without reference to yourself? The chief speaks of a ghost. How do you confine a ghost? How do you transport a ghost to a place of confinement—especially if it is supposedly bleeding lethal radiation and can burn holes in solid rock with its touch? How can you even have substance or occupy space? You're supposed to be an electromagnetic pulse. Why even bother to construct a cage for a phenomenon as short-lived as an electromagnetic pulse? You'd fry electronic equipment. Is all of this, then, occurring only in my head, in my shadow of a head, that is, during an infinitesimal moment?

And now I recall a Durrell line read in college, "Are people continuously themselves, or simply over and over again so fast that they give the illusion of continuous features—the temporal flicker of old silent film?"

*C'est fucking moi.* You only think you were a person named Phyllis Lewis. You only think you have a body and organs. You only think you are, or at least were, human. But you are a ghost of a real human being, not even a real ghost at that. And there is no P.A. system here, no TV cameras or monitors, no prison deep inside the earth.

But part of me still wants to believe otherwise. It protests, How, then, do we communicate with—?

And then it catches itself up short. Of course: we don't communicate with anybody. There is no *them* with whom to communicate. It's just *you* and *I*. Talking to ourselves. Talking to myself. Existing for a timeless interval, but only as a side-effect or by-product of particle decay. And alone. Alone. Alone.

No. Not quite. My husband and I waded into the cool water up to our knees, and he dipped his hand into the water, brushed his fingers across my face, and I was happy, excited by the prospect of going through the anomaly but deeply satisfied to be standing knee-deep in water with my husband. And then I noticed tears in his eyes. Darling, darling, I asked, what is it? He almost sobbed. "Whoever says time travel won't have its martyrs, just as space travel did? This anomaly business is so new and different and— weird. Who knows what could happen?" Nothing is going to happen to me, I said, I'm going to slip through and help set up a jump station on the other side, and then I'm coming right back. To you. To all this. Promise.

I have, for as long as I do have it, for either a nanosecond or an eon, everything Phyllis Lewis has. I have my memories. ○

R. Neube mixes love and plutonium in a hot tale  
about . . .

# CASCADING VIOLET HAIR

R. Neube

*the sighting*

It was Thursday, so, I walked home from work with Paul Li.  
"C'mon, Henry, pick up the pace. It isn't aerobic until your heart breaks a sweat."

"My liver's dripping. Isn't that enough?" I asked.

"You have to change your flabby life." The barrel-chested man winked at a pedestrian as he pulled off his shirt. Paul strutted, basking as if the rush-hour crowd had turned out solely to worship his physique.

"It's not flab, but my strategic reserve for the next famine."

"There a blow-out at Lingren's tonight. Why don't you join us?"

"No thanks," I grumbled, trying to pretend I wasn't out of breath.

"C'mon, Henry, you can't mourn forever."

"Get bent." My mind's eye watched my wife's body bag arcing toward Jupiter on its three year flight to eternity. I successfully chilled memories of her scent.

"Rikki has a sister with a taste for older men." Paul jogged circles around me.

"I'll pass."

A woman lifted her face. For a lingering heartbeat her grey eyes tickled my blues. I froze, a statue honoring idiocy through the ages.

Short and delicate, she vacuumed the hall as the crowd moved around her, dancing with the machine. Rolls of jumpsuit bulged over her free wrist and ankles. The Red Cross suit had been de-armed to accommodate a cast from armpit to right wrist. A fading, yellow bruise stretched from her forehead to her jaw, detouring around an oversized eye. Long violet hair formed a thick braid down her stooped back.

I'd seen hundreds like her over the years. The government of our orbital city allowed the Red Cross latitude as long as their wards performed tasks civil servants refused to do.

Paul grabbed me by the scruff. "Don't even think it. She's a *char*!"

"Let me go!"

"Char, char, char-ity. She's burnt out trash." Head shaking, my buddy released me. "You're insane." Paul broke into a jog.

Knees a-quiver, I approached her. My brain achieved Zen blankness as I stepped in the way of her vacuum. She killed its motor. Sausage fingers—out of place on the rest of her body—produced a knife. Grey eyes spoke to me long before her full lips moved.

"Out of my way, yerpie." Her oddly accented vowels pegged her as a Lunar.

"Lookit, my name's Henry Newton. Here's my ID. I'm not a perv, but you won't believe me because I can't stop babbling when I'm nervous, so just stab me and put me out of my misery."

"What time is it?"

Mom had warned me when I quit college that dropouts evolved into polis idiots who answered simple questions with a resounding "Huh?"

Her blade clicked back into its aluminum hilt. "I don't have a watch."

My racing mind could not interpret the numbers, so I held my watch in front of her. She returned the ID to my sweating hand. Fresh scars where her right ear had been seemed to spell something.

"I'm due for a break."

I fingercombed my beard. "Gracie Fernald runs a place that's close."

"Is a hundred Neds enough to buy a cup of coffee?"

"There hasn't been real coffee around here in ages. But she serves good coffee-water. My treat. No strings. Honest."

"Touch me and you'll carry your hand home in a doggie bag."

"That's the nicest thing anyone has said to me today."

I didn't ring the doorbell. My thumb pressed the lockplate. Gracie waved when the panel opened. The aroma of potato soup filled her apartment. I trundled the vacuum cleaner into a corner where two overstuffed chairs touched like guilty lovers. I mimed for coffee-water and cornbread. In a trice Gracie set a tray on the wall ledge beside us.

"How can she stand intruders in her home?" asked my guest once Gracie disappeared.

"It's cheaper than therapy. Her husbands and kids were killed in the same accident that k-killed my—" I coughed the knot from my throat. "A freighter sideswiped our polis a few years ago. Killed a lot of people. This pseudo-restaurant keeps her busy, social, and sane."

She scrutinized the contents of her steaming mug. "It should be called water-coffee."

"Buy coffee by-products, add some chems, and you have a product that doesn't require hard currency to import. That's life in the bankruptcy lane—ingenuity replaces currency."

She escalated from timid rabbit nibbles to virtually inhaling the cornbread. "I'm Diane Woltz, late of Mobil Habitat."

"That's darkside, isn't it?"

"I like a man who knows his lunar geography."

I stared at my feet. "What's the line on a geography fan getting a date?"

"I am NOT a prostitute! I may be a *char-ity* case, but I don't sell myself. It'll take me eighteen months to earn my fare home. I plan to work for it all."

Cornbread crumbled. Silence pounded my ego into gravel.

"I didn't mean—"

"You don't deserve this. I'm on edge. Someone spat on me today." She

gulped the scalding brew. "I'm assigned to Skylark Hall tomorrow. I go off-shift at 16.00. See you there. No strings, luggie."

"N-none." Trembling hands spilled fluid down my chest.

"By the way," she said, banging my knee with her cast, "long hair looks absurd on a man your age."

I fingercombed my thinning locks after Diane departed. I couldn't decide whether to faint or throw up.

Gracie arrived to clean up our debris. "Chars are jinxed, Henry. And they can infect you with their bad luck."

"If you can't hope, what sense does life make? Can you put this on my tab?"

"Don't think with your wrong brain, Henry."

*first date*

"This is not a date!" Diane poured on the speed to keep two steps ahead of me.

"I would have brought flowers, but I'm not rich. It was a choice between a sack of macaroni or . . . this."

Her wraparound was a plaid denim, its stains hardly noticeable. When she spun to face me, unbraided hair sprayed out in a violet cape. Her cast whacked my chest. She shook the box I'd given her over a trash bin. Dust showered off.

How had I missed that?

"I don't want your unwanted Christmas gifts."

"It's—I bought it for my . . . for my wife before the accident. It might be a trifle large for you."

Trapping the box under her cast, she tore it open. Wadding the synsilk blouse into a tight ball, she shoved it into my bag. We resumed our double-time march.

Don't worry, I told myself, you've made worse impressions. Remember when you caught Lisa's hair on fire during our first date? Don't say anything about Lisa. DON'T bore your date.

"The space here is astonishing. All the orbital cities I've visited felt like sardine cans, people everywhere."

"Fifteen to twenty citizens a week have migrated since our city's first bankruptcy," I explained. "And then there are the suicides. After our ninth national bankruptcy, you'd think people would have learnt how to cope. We've reached bottom. The Sol Monetary Fund guarantees our resource loans, so we can get our air and water on credit."

"Wonderful."

"It's going to get better," I lied. False hope was better than none.

"Where are we going?"

"Up that ladder, over a crosswalk, then up another ladder. We'll enter the fourth ventilation shaft on the left."

"Where are we going?" she repeated.

"I promise this will be worthwhile, meka."

"Don't call me that!"

I removed the cover from a duct and crawled inside. When we reached our destination I contorted into a sitting position in front of a vent.

"Our Senate sold our zoo to Ceres. It's for the best. The keepers have been feeding the herbivores to the carnivores because their food budget can only afford algae."

Three emaciated bison moved up a ramp into the python-corridor connecting New Dearborn with a docked freighter. The crackle of electric prods filled the air with ozone. Kangaroos wore shackles. A forklift hauled a cage with my favorite tiger, Czar Nicholas. He roared his contempt, reaching through the bars to take a lazy swipe at one of the workers.

My favorite cat, not Lisa's. She preferred the fish. Those had become tiger food.

"They're the lucky ones," I whispered.

Grey eyes glowed with reflected light. "Why don't you leave?"

"I own my apartment. Leave New Dearie now and I leave with zilch. If I stick around, my property will be worth something again. You have to hope—it's all we can afford."

Horses clopped serenely, scarcely a neigh. Saint Bernards were reluctant, snapping travelers. Someone dropped a box of squirrels. It broke open, providing excellent entertainment.

We took a series of maintenance tunnels back to the Red Cross shelter in Impala Hall. Avoiding a pair of electricians kept us on our toes. It was a harmless game, sneaking through the tunnels like teens.

"Why do you work so many jobs, Newton?"

"Lots of civil servants bailed, and the polis can't afford to replace them. I started out as a tech in the Bureau of Stats. Now I wear a diff hat every day. I enjoy the variety."

"I was a Mine Supervisor for Comtelle. I had one hundred and ninety-four miners under me."

"That must have been lumpy." When she didn't laugh, I hastily added, "I didn't know humans still mined."

"When I say miner, I mean machine. I made more money in a fortnight than you do in a decade. My job won't be open when I get back," she sighed like a leaking tire.

Before I could ask any questions from my long list, Diane vanished into an ocean of chars loitering around the entrance of the shelter. My stomach lurched. I squinted for a final glimpse, even the back of her head. A visual nightcap.

I returned to Fairlane Hall ere it dawned on me that I'd forgotten to ask for another date. Feeling every inch the consummate putz, I rang the shelter. A village idiot connected me with a schizoid who connected me with a drunk who insisted his name was Diane.

Futility gave me a thundering headache.

But I didn't dream of Lisa.

### *interlude*

Paul's head sagged to his desk. "C'mon, Henry, this is insane! I know a therapist with a kink for older men."

"Call me an older man once more and I'll staple your face to your desk. I'm only—" Could I really be forty and feel four hundred?

"Chars will use you."

"My skull is too small to hold her face. There's no explaining it."

"Have I introduced you to Janice's cousin Zelda?"

"Her eyes change color every time I look into them. Pure magic."

"Not magic, just lighting," groaned my oldest friend. He pounded his head against the desk. "You're hopeless. Jump her bones. Get it out of your system." He pulled weights out of a drawer and began curling.

I rubbed my eyes, trying to remove the ghost of my wife from my imagination.

On her day off Lisa had come to work with me; on my day off I had tagged along with my wife. It was an unspoken agreement that we wouldn't speak while the other worked. Propinquity sufficed. For two decades we'd never been more than a few hours away from each other. She was supposed to tag along with me that day, but a crew member of a docked ship was selling sausages for Neds, not hard currency. I envisioned her standing in line when that damned freighter tore through our city's hull.

I exhaled slowly. Orders on the left and inventory on the right split my computer screen. Door motors registered a big zero again. I matched what few parts we had to citizens qualified to make their own repairs. It wasn't much, but better than sitting on my hands.

"Henry, she's a major mistake. I might as well be talking to the wall," he told the wall.

"Walls? I saw some wall panels in the inventory of Storage Six. Have I mentioned how Diane smells? She—"

"Just remember, I told you so."

### *second date*

I strolled from the City Printing Office with a toner cartridge stuffed down my pants. It took an hour to find Sydney. The hustler purchased the cartridge for two thousand Neds.

No sooner had I hand-cranked my door shut than the phone beeped.

"Henry?"

"Diane? I tried to call you." The plaintive tone of my voice embarrassed me.

"I'm too bored to breathe. Would you like to kick around for a while?"

"Pos. You could pop over here."

"What if we meet in Smith Hall?" she asked. "I saw the animals, but I haven't seen the zoo."

"They locked it up after the riot. Dream Hall might be fun. We could people watch or something."

"I'll see you in front of Nixon Burger in twenty." The line went dead.

After counting the profit from my larceny I emptied my retirement fund out of an old shoe. A roll of one hundred Ned coins came as a surprise. So much cash tempted me to splurge on a tube ride.

Diane sat on the rim of a faux marble fountain. Framed in spotlights and water spray, her violet hair appeared to glow. Her hands and bare feet were painted to match her hair. The woman flapped her cast by way of welcome, then moaned from the ill-advised movement.

"What happened?" My fingers brushed her cast.

"I made the mistake of sharing a bottle my first night at the shelter. Someone thought that obliged me to share my body."

"I hope you hurt them, meka."

"Don't call me that! My husband calls me that."

I sat beside her. When our knees touched I felt electricity. My lungs forgot to fill.

"Husband, past tense." Once the first words flowed, the dam failed and more tumbled from her pouty lips. "I flew out to Chalgrin Polis to surprise him. Barry volunteered for the Trade and his contract was up. He didn't get off the transport, so I went to the consulate. Had a bureaucrat fork over a 'Dear Diane' memo. The son of a bitch didn't have the common decency to send a vid or even a letter."

My hand fluttered atop her fist. I pulled her to her feet and we wended through the retail hall. Half the lights were dark, much to the delight of hormonal teens moaning in the deeper shadows. We continued to a Vendo outlet.

"No strings," I promised, feeding a vending machine nine coins.

I pushed a steaming tray of beef stew at Diane. For myself, I selected fried algae cakes. After leering at her sashay to a corner table, I went down the line until my roll of hundreds disappeared. Chocolate and carrots, almonds and leeks, and, of course, coffee-waters crowded my tray.

"I once spent a thousand dollars—real dollars, not these phony Neds—to lose five kilos. I've lost twice that since I arrived on this can. Maybe I'll open a weight loss clinic when I return home—fortified oatmeal three times a day, that's the shelter's secret."

She licked a petite cube of beef gravy-free. Could a tongue be that long? After sprinkling almonds atop the stew she attacked the leeks and carrots. I nibbled on a Hershey bar before giving it to her. The only other customer rose and staggered out of the joint.

I needed privacy to lick a lady's fingers clean.

"You aren't getting laid."

"If I wanted a sure thing, I would have rented someone. We could—"

"Why are those Neds so incredibly large? My money-belt is a mess," she said.

"Whenever the Fund devalues our currency, our Senate makes the money larger. It's a laugh."

"Money is NEVER a laughing matter. I planned to throw Barry a mega-party. Teach my husband, my ex to call me a miser! So I had my life's saving in cash."

"Cash?" I asked.

"I was going to prove I was no cheapskate. I wanted to see his face when I tipped a waiter a week's wages. But he didn't show, and I was mad, and I started drinking, and one thing led to another—my ID, my return ticket, even my clothes...all stolen. The consulate was pleasant about the disaster. They gave me a choice of carriers back home. If I had chosen better—"

"Carrier?" I'd been distracted by the curve of her wrist.

"Luna provides stranded citizens a ticket home. I abrogated my gov's responsibility for my well-being by jumping ship on New Dearborn. They

didn't believe me about the assault. If I hadn't jumped ship, one of those perverts would have murdered me. I—"

Diane leapt up and fled the dining area. My foot caught in the chair, slowing my pursuit. Outside the Vendo, I collided with a shopper the size of Io. By the time we untangled my date had vanished.

I returned to the table and finished the feast. We never wasted food on Dearie. The stew tasted wonderful because she had touched it.

*an interlude of doubt*

I anxiously awaited the days until my job rotation placed me in front of a terminal in Judge Bundy's office, allowing me to research her record.

For thirty years Diane had escaped the attention of John Law, then she left Luna and became a crime spree. The report of her rip-off was dated the ninth. She spent the tenth in the drunk tank. On the twelfth, she assaulted a cop who busted her for suspicion of unlicensed prostitution. The next day, she was arrested for attempted murder of a dockworker.

Long weekends were hell on Chalgrin Polis.

She'd filed an attempted rape report with the New Dearborn police when she blew into town. The document accused the entire second watch bridge crew of the freighter *Nelson IX*. Five crew members claimed a birthday party went awry after the "hired help" went insane. Given their clean records, it was an open and shut case; more so, once they learned Diane had been expelled from rowdy Chalgrin as an undesirable.

Fortunately, jails cost money New Dearie didn't have. More fortunately for Diane, the Red Cross got to her before someone in uniform "accidentally" airlocked her. I scanned a copy of a notification she'd received from home nulling her citizenship until she appeared before a tribunal of her peers back on the Moon.

Her broken arm wasn't mentioned. However, an alert had been sent from the Red Cross to the police about her propensity for violence.

What had I gotten myself into? What had she gotten herself into?

*third date*

The Red Cross shelter's antiseptic lobby harked back to my college dorm—tasteless and indestructible. Every few minutes someone asked me why I was there. I gave them Diane's name, and they wandered off, never to return. From the corner of my eye I saw her enter the room.

She saw me and fled.

"What's the shake?" I asked once I caught up with her.

"We are mutually exclusive personalities. You're a go-nowhere wage-slave on a go-nowhere poverty polis. I'll escape this orbital disaster, but you're going to ROT here!"

"You want to see something fun?"

She shrugged.

I used the access card I'd been issued during my stint as a janitor to activate a freight elevator. She followed reluctantly, her hand stuffed into her knife-pocket. After the ride we followed a maze of stairs and corridors.

The Lounge had been a nightclub before the first bankruptcy. A profound chill puffed our breath. Swirling Jupiter peeked at us through bare

patches in the frost-covered dome. Directly overhead, lights from a distant polis dominated the field of stars. A moon (Which one? My brain blanked as I brushed against Diane.) the size of a ping-pong ball glowed saffron as it melded the anemic rays of Sol with the reflected glory of Jupiter. We huddled wordlessly in the center of the dance floor, watching Jupiter for an hour.

The long walk back to Impala Hall restored our body heat. Much to my surprise, her cast-topped hand wrapped around mine. That made me all the warmer. I resisted the urge to bury my face in her vivid mane.

"I'm a loser in a loser polis. My savings are trapped like a fly in amber in a negative equity apartment. It isn't the life I planned, but it's the one I have, so I'll muddle through."

"I'm angry at my life, not you," she admitted.

"There have been massive housing shortages ever since Earth was murdered. Sooner or later, folks'll come fill Dearie. If we can replace our population, our economy will revive. This much I can hope for."

"Hope is all you people have, isn't it?"

"I envy you. Bones heal. Bruises fade. You'll get back to the Moon and forget your pain. You don't need hope, you have a future. My future may never heal."

"Maimed metaphors don't heal either."

Her laughter echoed down the stairwell, leaving as dulcet and returning as a ghostly taunt. Our feet beat time on the stairs. A step groaned beneath my foot.

Metal shrieked in my imagination. Crash doors creaked shut. Trapped behind them, the hapless pounded their fists bloody. The alarms covered their screams until the air finished hissing into space. Lisa had been found with. . . .

I clenched my eyes and fought the memories.

"What if your Senate seizes your property under eminent domain and—"

"A cheerful thought."

"Don't interrupt me!" She pushed me away with balled fists. Her scowl fluttered into a frown into a smile. "I'm sorry."

"No, it was my fault."

Silence strangled the moment until she said, "I found a job as a short order cook at Annie's Kudzu Chips at night and warehousing at Vollen's during the day. They both start Monday. We should celebrate this weekend."

"My place? No strings. I'll whip us up a feast."

"Don't make this something it isn't. I'm lonely, and I don't hate you. That's as far as it goes. Friday, say seven. Must you leer like that?"

"It's not a leer. I'm suffering an astonishment-stroke."

"Polis trash," she grumbled by way of good-bye outside the shelter.

I danced home.

### *preparations*

Nuclear industry generated our orbital city's sole export dollars. The firm ran a constant ad for help. I had refrained from temp work there in the past. However, I'd never invited a violet-haired woman to my home before.

The doctor holstered her scanner before signing the company health certificate. Her afghan shift was threadbare, but starch-stiff and clean. "Yer remarkably healthy for a man committing suicide."

My ears twitched at her coarse accent. Was it something in the water that made Martians so loud? So opinionated? So very Martian?

"I eat a lot of veggies."

"You can die like this!" She snapped long, calloused fingers. "If yer lucky. Otherwise, you may join the cancer of the month club. Is such risk worth a few Neds?"

"A few thousand Neds wouldn't get me out of bed on my day off. It's that extra ration card I'll get that hooked me. I have an acquaintance who will trade a five hundred gram tinned ham for that rat-card."

Brown curls showered dandruff on her narrow shoulders. Orange-dyed eyes caught fire. "Yer working as a Glow Boy for a pound of meat?"

I grinned like a polis idiot. "As long as I work smart, I'll be okay. A lot of my pards have done it. Those breeder reactors are safer than you think. Besides, it's Diane's first time over, and I want to impress her with the ham."

"Yer killing yerself to impress a woman? Is this her name as yer next of kin? Impala Hall? That's the shelter's address. Curiouser and curiouser."

"You make it sound like I'm bobbing for plutonium. I replace some pipes, clean some filters, maybe mop a few floors. A few rads won't hurt me."

"Yer showing yer age, Citizen Newton. They're measured in 'eels' these days." She flipped open a book to show me color plates of radiation burns.

"An attitude as sour as yours will end up on your permanent record." I laughed when she didn't.

She glued a dosimeter on my bare chest. "Don't touch it. I'm the only person that can remove that badge without causing excruciating pain. Don't allow the Company to tell you different."

"Absol, meka." I winked.

She guffawed.

Minutes later, I entered the reactor complex. The door on the locker room had a broken hinge. My paranoia rejoiced after I inflated the envirosuit to check for leaks and found several. It exhausted a roll of duct tape to seal the raggedy enviro. A heartbeat after I donned the helmet, an alarm sounded.

I peeked, then cautiously advanced deeper into the facility. The alarms and flashing lights tore through me. As long as I kept moving, fear didn't clot my heart. The sleazy filter in the neck of the suit made the air taste metallic. A burning figure rocketed out of a doorway. The runner knocked me flat before crashing headfirst into a wall.

Ma Newton's boy didn't need a falling apple for inspiration. Slapping out the flames, I dragged the unconscious runner to the complex's primary airlock. The guard cycled us through in a trice; whereupon, we were sprayed, peeled, sprayed, and hustled to Chez Doc.

"Fried," she announced after one glance at me.

"Remind me to discuss your bedside manner later."

A nurse with a Fu Manchu moustache pushed me flat on the table and slapped a derm on my shoulder. The thingee in his hand tore an appalling amount of flesh off me. He yanked the dosimeter off before the painkiller kicked in.

The doc screamed, though I could not make out her words. She and the nurse fought to control the runner's convulsions. His face and visor had fused into a horror show. My brain capsized in the sea of numbness.

"Be still," Doc commanded an eternity later, rousing me from a dream about chocolate birds. "I have to confirm these figures." Her instrument tore flesh from my good shoulder.

"Will my hair fall out before I die?"

"You've lucked out, Citizen Newman." She hooked her thumb toward the man I'd rescued. He was being zipped into a body bag.

"Name's Newton."

"Yer chest dose reads three hundred and ninety eels. Considering the air standards on New Dee, yer lungs and blood chems are okay. You'll probably be sick for a few days, no more."

"What do you mean sick? Am I going to sneeze and have my brain come out?"

"A bout of flu would be a good yardstick. Is yer dream date tonight?" A corner of her mouth curled upward. Was it mockery or a Martian smile?

"Naw, I have until tomorrow at 20.00."

"Extraordinary," she said, raining dandruff on me.

"What happened to the reactors?"

"Nothing major. Some squirrels gnawed through a wiring harness. Where were you when the heat exchanger exploded?"

"Wrapping duct tape on my suit. I'm not getting sick! They have to pay me for the whole shift, don't they?"

"Yer a basket case, Newman. Discuss yer salary with yer union rep."

"The name's Newton, not Newman. And unions are outlawed on Dearie, you Martian Bolshevik."

She snickered. "Did I mention radiation diarrhea? Drink plenty of fluids. Why don't you come by the office tomorrow? I can sew back anything that falls off."

"I won't be sick!"

The Martian lacked the manners to turn before laughing at me.

#### *dream date*

Makson Nuclear Industry, Inc. paid me double in exchange for signing away my future litigation rights. I up-traded the two rat-cards for an .8 kilo

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tinned ham and four hundred grams of chocolate. Pea pods and mushrooms came via the black market. *Kinal* and corn meal were provided by the grey market on the docks. My regular rat-card qualified me to spend a month's salary on assorted goodies from the official market.

Aspirin and Nelex eased my symptoms, although I had the energy level of a banana slug. To compensate, I began preparing dinner while waiting for breakfast to boil.

Cleaning nearly killed me. Green mold in the bathroom thrived despite three steel wool assaults. Mopping caused a clean streak, so I had to mop and mop until the floor changed colors. I hauled my garbage a million kilometers to the trash room.

I couldn't stop sweating. Twice, I changed my soggy date garb. The dawning of the magic hour found me draped over my living room hammock. I swayed. The clock ticked. At 20.10, I discovered a strip of the floor I hadn't mopped. At 20.30, I headed into the bedroom to change my clothes again. Hope died, a slow, ticking death. At 20.41 and eighteen seconds, I used the clock as a frisbee.

The phone buzzed. I dived across the room.

"How's your date going, old man?" asked Paul.

"Does the term 'expendable friendship' mean anything to you?"

"Are you this cranky with your char?"

I severed the connection and swept up the remains of the clock. My last drop of hope drained down the cosmic toilet. At 21.00, I sat at the table, forcing myself to eat the pile of johnny cakes I'd prepared. They were greasy and cold, the perfect snack for the miserable.

The door buzzed. It never occurred to me it might be a tardy Diane. I expected the Grim Reaper or a tax auditor. I snailed to the door by the fifth buzz, spinning the wheel to open the door manually. The Martian doc bee-lined for the feast. Down the line of covered dishes she traveled, sniffing each like a cocaine puppy.

"You missed yer appointment this morn. How is willpower faring against radiation? I was visiting a friend down the hall and— No, that's a lie. Truth is, I was curious."

"Ya hungry?" After mocking her accent, I handed her a plate.

Like most planet-born, her legs were prime. A polis' sub-standard gravity could seldom produce calves like hers. She wore a rainbow rag-dress.

"My God, this is real Martian ham!"

Scooting pots aside, she sat atop the counter. She hoisted the bottle of wine for a long pull. Only a Martian could guzzle like a wino, yet make it appear dainty. Maybe it was the classy way she wiped her mouth on her sleeve after a fetching belch.

Martians!

"Is there a law against chewing food?"

She grinned, exposing a set of stainless steel teeth. "I got killed during the Wars, but I'm much better now. A lot of my original equipment was replaced. My new stomach doesn't require chewing."

"A once dead veteran and a Martian to boot. Sounds like the makings of a social plague. Why are you here?"

"Can't you guess?"

I sipped my glass of tepid tea, embarrassed and stubbornly refusing to snag her bait. "I mean, here on New Dearborn."

The char meant nothing, I kept telling myself. She had just been a hope hook to hang my dreams for the nonce. I turned to wipe a tear.

"I'm paid by a grant from the Lytan Foundation to provide medical services, since yer doctors left for richer climes. As a reward for my humanitarian services, YER government has declared my paychecks are illegal currency transactions. Yer government is confiscating my hard currency salary and issuing me those damned worthless Neds at the official rate! My every dollar becomes a nickel. I'm sleeping at the clinic because I can't afford rent."

"Tell me about it." A modicum of enthusiasm slipped into my voice, the inner bureaucrat rising to the occasion.

"You ain't gonna ask, are you? One of my duties is certifying people for travel. Yer *friend* received a money order from a cousin and left on the Greyhound shuttle this morn. She asked me to say good-bye. She was extremely depressed about it."

"Really?"

"I'm an awful liar, ain't I?"

I shook my head slowly, mustering a brave façade. "Tell me about your 3-E prob."

"What?"

"Foreign income falls under Clause 3E of the Revenue Code. I often solve problems in return for the occasional favor."

She spilled. I nodded.

"I can do something about that. Now, for the quid pro quo, my dear doctor, I have a friend with an ego problem. How do you feel about pranks?"

"On Mars, my fav is putting a grenade—"

"We aren't in a Martian asylum." I explained the gag before I dialed Paul.

As usual my buddy picked up and made heavy panting noises. I turned on the vid pickup for a change. We exchanged some empty banter before I turned over the phone to the good doc.

"Citizen Li, this is Doctor Jessica Stracher." She flashed her ID to the camera. "Citizen Newton has explained yer problem to me. REALLY, Citizen, this is the twenty-second century. No matter how advanced, yer venereal disease can be treated. Be at my office at 16.00 tomorrow, or I'll have Public Health issue a warrant for yer arrest."

I leaned into the picture as Paul began yelling. I waved and unplugged the machine.

She carried the pot of *kinal* to the table where she attacked the alien veggie with a large wooden spoon. I went into the living room and played at my terminal. Shelling through the polis' data onion, I cracked the Revenue's base. Shreds of *kinal* dropped on my shoulder.

"There's a form of institutional judo you have to use on Dearie. You can't say your paycheck is in the wrong category unless you can show where the right category is."

"Sounds like you enjoy this paper chase."

"You have to take your pleasure where you find it, meka. More ham?" ○

# VINEGAR PEACE, OR, THE WRONG- WAY USED- ADULT ORPHANAGE

Michael Bishop

Michael Bishop has published seventeen novels in his career as a freelancer, including the Nebula Award-winning *No Enemy But Time* (1982); *Unicorn Mountain*, winner of the Mythopoeic Fantasy Award; and *Brittle Innings* (1994), an imaginative study of minor-league baseball in the Deep South during World War II and winner of the Locus Award for best fantasy novel. He has written and published two mystery novels in collaboration with Paul Di Filippo under the joint pseudonym Philip Lawson, *Would It Kill You to Smile?* (1998) and *Muskrat Courage* (2000); he recently published a collection of essays, *A Reverie for Mister Ray* (2005); and recently edited the Thunder's Mouth Press anthology *A Cross of Centuries: Twenty-Five Imaginative Tales About the Christ* (2007). His latest book, *Passing for Human* (an anthology of stories about nonhuman creatures of various sorts, well, passing for human), which he and

**Steven Utley co-edited for Peter Crowther's PS  
Publishing will feature a haunting wraparound dust  
jacket by Michael's late son, Jamie Bishop.**

**O**n Thursday evening, your doorbell rings. Two small men in off-white shirts and black trousers, like missionaries of a dubious religious sect, stand outside your threshold giving you scary pitying looks.

Are you Ms. K——? they ask.

When you assent, they say they've come to transport you to the Vinegar Peace Wrong-Way, Used-Adult Orphanage thirty minutes north of your current residence in a life-help cottage of the Sour Thicket Sanatorium, where your father died seven years ago. But *you* don't wish to be transported anywhere.

The smaller of the two small men, seizing your arm above the elbow, says that an *order* has come down and that they must establish you, before 8:30 PM, in a used-adult orphanage—upon penalty of demotion for them and unappealable eviction for you. If you don't cooperate, they will ransack your cottage and throw you out on the street with your musty belongings.

Why now? you ask. Neither stooge manifests a glimmer of humanity. After all, you've been an *orphan*—as they insist on terming your condition—since you were a vigorous fifty-nine. They should show some respect.

The man holding your bicep smirks. That's why they call it a *Wrong-Way, Used-Adult Orphanage*, he says. You get into one not because you've lost a parent. Your last living child has to die.

Jesus, blurts the other man. That goes against all our training.

You say nothing. You feel as if someone has opened a trap in your stomach and shoved in a package of wet cement. You sink to your knees, but not all the way because the smaller small man refuses to release your arm.

You feel you've just climbed twelve sets of stairs. Someone has injected stale helium into your head, inflating it to beach-ball size.

O God, you cry: O God, O God.

Even to yourself you sound like a scared puppy, not a woman. Your only living offspring, one of only two who bore your genes, has just died in the interminable War on Worldwide Wickedness, probably in a snowy province of R——.

Because Elise and her earlier-lost brother died childless years after Mick, your husband, passed away, *you* have passed from a state of natural, late-life orphanhood to the sad, wrong-way orphanhood of the issue-shorn. Only someone similarly bereft can know your devastation.

Put your stuff in two plastic duffels, the cruel stooge says: Only two.

Please don't make me leave my home, you beg of him. Just give me a knock-me-out so I can die.

Your lightheadedness persists: your dead daughter swims before your eyes like a lovely human swan, but the rock in your stomach keeps you from taking pleasure in her shock-generated image.

Against your will, you must say goodbye to Elise forever, as you once did to Mick and later to your darling son Brice.

Eventually, despite your protests, you cram clothing and toiletries into a duffel bag and some file discs and image cubes into another. Then the cruel stooge and his only slightly kinder partner escort you out to the van for *transport* to Vinegar Peace.

Mr. Weevil, director of this Wrong-Way, Used-Adult Orphanage looks maybe twenty-six, with slicked-back hair you've seen before on leading men in old motion pictures, but he greets you personally in the rotunda-like foyer, points you to a chair, and triggers a video introduction to the place. His head, projected on a colossal screen at gallery level, spiels in a monotone:

*The death of your last surviving child (good riddance) in the War on Worldwide Wickedness makes you too valuable (unfit) to continue residing among the elder denizens (constipated old fools) of your life-help cottage (costly codger dump). So we've brought you here to shelter (warehouse) you until our Creator calls you to an even more glorious transcendent residency above (blah-blah, blah-blah).*

The talking head of Mr. Weevil—whose living self watches *with* you, his hands clasped above his coccyx—remarks that you can stroll inside the orphanage anywhere, but that you can *never leave*—on pain of solo confinement (for a first violation) or instant annihilation (for any later misstep).

The building has many mansions (rooms), *viz.*, 1) Cold Room, 2) Arboretum, 3) Mail Room, 4) Guest Suite, 5) Chantry, 6) Sleep Bay, 7) Refectory, 8) Furnace Room, and 9) Melancholiarium. Orphans will, and *should*, visit all nine rooms at some point, for every room will disclose its significance to its visitors, and these elucidations will charge any resident's stay with meaning.

*Don't be alarmed*, the director's talking head concludes, *if I haven't mentioned a room you view as necessary. The existence of restrooms, closets, offices, kitchens, servant quarters, attics, basements, secret nooks, and so forth, goes without saying.*

A young woman dressed like the men who snatched you from your lodgings takes your elbow—gently—and escorts you from the rotunda. And as Mr. Weevil's body glides smoothly away, his face fades from the gallery-level screen.

Where are we going? you ask the woman.

She smiles as she might at an infant mouthing a milk bubble.

Where are the other residents? Will I have my own room?

That the director included a dormitory in his list of mansions suggests otherwise, but you have to ask. Still, you have begun to think you're in a reeducation camp of some sort. Your stomach tightens even as you tighten your hold on the duffels, which now feel as heavy as old lead sash weights.

Miss, you plead. Why am I here? Where are we going?

She stops, stares you in the eye, and says: Oldsters who've lost children in the war often make trouble. Hush. It isn't personal. We're sheltering all or-

phaned adults in places like this, for everybody's benefit. You'll meet other orphans soon, but now Mr. Weevil'd like you to visit the refrigitorium.

*What?*

The Cold Room. Relax, Ms. K—. It's nice. It's a surprise, sort of.

It's a surprise, all right, and no *sort of* about it. Your escort has abandoned you inside the Cold Room, which drones like a refrigerator but sparkles all about you as if you were its moving hub. Ice coats the walls in ripples and scales, each its own faintly glowing color.

Effigies of frozen liquid occupy shallow niches about the walls, and you soon find that three of these, interleaved with simulacra of unfamiliar persons, commemorate your dead: Mick, Brice, and Elise.

As if over a skin of crushed Ping-Pong balls, you totter gingerly to each beloved ice figure in turn.

Tears spontaneously flow, only to harden on the planes of your face. You clutch your gut and bend in agony before each image of loss. You sob into the chamber's dull hum, stupidly hopeful that no one's wired it for video or sound, and that your pain has no commiserating spies.

You've done this before. Must you indulge again? Have you no shame?

Over time your tears re-liquefy, and the ice effigies glisten *more* wetly. The Cold Room has grown imperceptibly warmer. The ice on its walls stays solid, but the statues—by design or accident, but more likely the former—begin to shimmer and melt. Do they stand on hotplates or coil about intricate helices of invisible heating wires? Whatever the case, they dissolve. They go. And there's no reversing the process.

So much water collects—from your tear ducts and the de-solidifying statues—that puddles gather in the floor. Even the ceiling drips.

If you stay here out of a misbegotten desire to honor your treasured dead, you'll wind up drenched, ill, and soul-sick.

Freezing, sweating, weeping, you back away. You must.

You have a slick card in hand: a floor diagram of the Vinegar Peace Wrong-Way, Used-Adult Orphanage. **YOU ARE HERE**, it asserts in a box next to the blueprint image of the Cold Room, **BUT YOU *COULD* BE HERE**.

An arrow points to Room 2, the *Arboretum*. Well, you could use a sylvan glade about now—an orchard or a grove—and because you walk purposefully, the room pops up just where the arrow indicates.

Like the Cold Room, the Arboretum is unlocked. Unlike the Cold Room, it soars skyward four or more floors, although its dome has an ebony opaqueness that hides the stars. You gape. Willows stretch up next to sycamores, oaks shelter infant firs and pines, disease-free elms wave in the interior breeze like sea anemones in a gnarl of current, and maples drop whirling seeds, in windfalls lit like coins by the high fluorescents.

Twilight grips the Arboretum.

Out of this twilight, from among the pillars of the trees, figures in cloaks of pale lemon, lime, lavender, ivory, blue, pink, orange, and other soft hues emerge at intervals. They amble forward only a little way, find a not-too-nearby tree, and halt: they decline to impose themselves.

None of these persons qualifies as a wrong-way orphan because all are too young: between thirty and forty. All stand on the neat margins of this wood like passengers with tickets to bleak destinations. Although none seems fierce or hostile—just the opposite, in fact—you prepare yourself to flee, if your nerve fails you. Your heart bangs like an old jalopy engine.

Pick one of us, a woman in a lavender cape tells you. She speaks conversationally from under a willow in the middle distance, but you hear her just fine. The acoustics here are excellent: maybe she's been miked.

Pick one of you for what?

Condolence and consolation: as a sounding board for whatever feeds your angst. The woman advances one tree nearer.

You snort. You've had more sounding boards than a cork-lined recording room. Why take on another?

The people in coats and capes approach in increments, picking new trees much nearer you. They appear devoid of menace, but you think again about fleeing. Even in this twilight, their pastel garments are tinged by the shade thrown by overarching foliage: a disquieting phenomenon.

Pastel shades, you think. These people are *pastel shades*.

Soon your gaze picks up a man approaching steadily through a sycamore copse, a figure in grey twill pants and a jacket the pale ash of pipe dottle. He has boyish features, but crow's feet at his eyes and a salt-and-pepper beard lift him out of the crib of callow naïfs. He wears a mild don't-patronize-me smile and doesn't stop coming until he stands less than an arm's length away.

Ah, Ms. K——, I'm delighted to see you, despite the inauspicious circumstances that bring you here. His elevated vocabulary satirizes itself, deliberately. Call me Father H——. He gives his hand, which you clasp, aware now the pastel holograms beneath the trees have retreated. Their withdrawal has proceeded without your either ignoring or fully remarking it.

You're not wearing colors, you tell Father H——.

Tilting his head, he says: *Colors?*

A host of pastel shades besieged me just now, but you, well, you wear heartsick grey. To illustrate, you pinch his sleeve.

Father H—— laughs. Grey's the pastel of black, and I'm a child of the cloth who *always* wears this declension.

If you say so, you reply skeptically.

He chuckles and draws you—by his steps rather than his hand—into the nearest glimmering copse. Tell me about Elise, he says. Tell me all about Elise.

Later, drained again, you return to the entry clearing still in the father's company, unsure of the amount of time that has passed but grateful for the alacrity with which it has sped. Twilight still reigns in the Arboretum, but the clock-ticks in your heart hint that you have talked with Father H—— forever. You touch his shoulders and yank him to you in an irrepressible hug.

Thank you, you tell him. Thank you. I may be able to sleep now.

The grey-clad pastor separates from you and smiles through his beard. I've done nothing, Ms. K——.

You've done everything.

His smile turns inward: But I *feel* like a little boy who makes mud pies and carries them to the hungry.

Padre H—— takes your plastic card, which he calls a crib sheet, and accompanies you to the Mail Room.

If you use this thing—he fans himself with the card, like some dowager aunt in an airless August sanctuary—you'll look like a clueless newbie. He chuckles and shakes his head.

Am I the only one?

Hardly. Soldiers die every hour. But try to look self-assured—as if you belong.

The corridor now contains a few used-adult orphans, some walking in wind suits, some pushing mobile IVs, some hobbling on canes or breathing through plastic masks as they enter lifts or try the stairs. None looks self-assured, but all appear to know their way about. None wears an institutional gown, but beiges, browns, and sandy hues characterize the garments they do wear.

Raw depression returns to knot your stomach and redden your eyes. One or two residents glance toward you, but no one speaks.

Friendly bunch, you mumble.

They just don't trust anyone they haven't met, says Father H——. And who can blame them? You could be a security creep or an insurance snoop. Carrying these bags?

What better way to insinuate yourself among them?

You enter the Mail Room by a door near the screen on the second gallery. This shadowy chamber teems with ranks of rainbow-colored monitors, not with persons, and Father H—— bids you goodbye. (Where is he going? Maybe to hear the confession of a sinful yew?)

A young person in a milky-orange vest approaches. You can't really tell if she's male or female, but you decide to think of her as a woman.

May I help you?

I don't know. I've just come. You hoist your duffels, aware now that they prove absolutely nothing.

Tell me your name, ma'am.

You do, and she takes you to a monitor, keyboards briefly, and summons a face-on portrait of Elise in her battle regalia. Several other people sit in this room (you realize now) before pixel images of *their* dead, trying to talk with them, or their spirits, through arthritic fingertips. You touch the liquid shimmer of the screen with an index finger, and Elise's skin blurs and reshapes after each gentle prod. Your guide asks if you would like to access any family messages in her unit file, for often soldiers leave private farewells in their unclassified e-folders.

You murmur a supplicating Please.

A message glows on the monitor: either Elise's last message or the message that she *arranged* to appear last.

Dear Mama,

Do you remember when Brice died? (Well, of course you do.) I recall you telling somebody after they'd shipped Brice's body home, *Elise*

*was Mick's and Brice was mine; now I'm forever bereft. You didn't see me in the corner, you had no idea I'd heard.*

From that day on, Mama, I began thinking, *What can I do to become yours, if I'm not yours now?*

Then it hit me: I had to change myself into the one you claimed—without betraying Dad or Brice or my own scared soul. So I tried to *become* Brice without pushing away Dad or undoing myself.

As soon as I could, I enlisted. I trained. I went where they sent me. I did everything you and they said, just like Brice, and *you sent me* messages about how proud you were—but also how scared.

If you're reading this, your fears have come true, and so has my wish to do everything just like Brice, even if someone else had to undo me for me to *become* just what you loved. With all my heart, I wish you pleasant mourning, Mama, and a long bright day.

Love,  
Elise

You read this message repeatedly. You must wipe your eyes to do so, also using the linen tail of your blouse to towel the keyboard and your hands.

Upsettingly, you have something else to tell Father H—— about Elise, and indeed about yourself.

The young woman, or young man, from the Mail Room gives you directions to your next stop. You ride a slow glass-faced elevator up two gallery levels to the Guest Suite, which has this legend in tight gold script across its smoky door:

***Grief is a species of prestige.* —Wm. Matthews**

A bellhop—or an abrupt young man in the *getup* of a bellhop—grabs your duffels. I'll take these to the Sleep Bay, ma'am, he says. Stow them there later, under your cot or whatever. And he swings away.

Old people in brown evening clothes stand at the bar sipping whiskey or imported dusky beer. A gaunt pretty woman detaches herself from the bar and moves insouciantly into your space. Her nose tip halts only inches from your own.

It's terrible when a child dies, she declares, but people *treat* you so well, at least for a while.

You take a step back. Is that right?

Didn't you find that to be true after your son was killed?

I suppose. I didn't know much of anything then. I just sort of— You stop, stymied by the task of saying *exactly* what you found to be true.

An IED transformed *our* son into rain. It fell red, you understand, but he scarcely suffered. And afterward—afterward, everyone was very sweet. For as long as they could stand to be, of course.

You gape at the woman.

To save him from an IED, I could have used an IUD—but that occasion was so long ago I never imagined a child of mine facing such danger. You just don't think.

That's true, you reply, because *You just don't think* rings with more truth than any other utterance out of her mouth.

(And, by the way, has she just equated an Improvised Explosive Device with an intra-uterine contraceptive?)

And, she continues, people's kindness toward the bereaved merits our notice and gratitude. She waves at the bar—at the banks of flowers, an alcove of evening clothes, the teeming buffet, a table of architecturally elaborate desserts.

You say: I'd prefer people rude and my children still alive.

Come now, the woman counters. Bereavement bestows glamour. Pick out a gown, have a dry martini.

No, you say. You plant a dismissive kiss on the woman's papery brow and weave your way back to the door.

The nearby glass-faced elevator drops you into the mazelike basement of the Wrong-Way, Used-Adult Orphanage, where you sashay, as if by instinct, to the Chantry. The Chantry now accommodates Father H—and several old-looking women, virtual babushkas, so unlike the denizens of the Guest Suite that they appear to belong to a different species.

These women groan on kneelers before the altar at which Father H—stands, his arms spread like those of the military effigy impaled on an olivewood cross hanging overhead. They wear widows' weeds, which strain at the seams about their arms, waists, and hips. Maybe the father has shrived them. Now, though, he blesses a monstrance of tiny spoiled rice cakes and a syringe of red-wine vinegar, and moves along the altar rail to dispense these elements.

Ms. K—, he says upon noticing you: 'S great to see you again.

You stand inside the door, appalled and humbled by the warrior Christ floating in shadow above the altar. It wears Brice's face, but also Elise's, and surely the faces of all the babushkas' lost children. You see that two or three of these wrong-way orphans have stuffed their smocks with tissues or rags, and that a few, whatever their burdens of flesh, look barely old enough to have *babies*, although they wouldn't be kneeling here—would they?—if that were true. They gaze up raptly, not at the padre but at the suspended effigy: Sacrificer and Sacrificed.

The father nods a welcome. Care to join these communicants?

I'm not of your creedal persuasion, Father.

Oh, but you are, Ms. K—. He gestures welcomingly again. The Church of the Forever Bereft. Come. I've got something better than mud pies. He lifts the chalice and nods at the monstrance: A *little* better, anyway.

You walk to the front and kneel beside a woman with a heart-shaped face and the eyes of a pregnant doe. She lays her hand on your wrist.

Our kids didn't deserve to die, she says. Them dying before us turns everything upside-down. And when our high and mighty mucky-mucks aren't having whole towns blown up, they spew bunkum to keep us quiet.

*Bunk cum?* you ask yourself, too confused to take offense. But maybe you should tell the father how you slew Elise.

Says Father H—: The more the words the less they mean.

—Yeah, say several women. —We know *that's* scriptural. —You said a throat's worth. —Selah to that, padre. And so on.

Let me give you vinegar peace, he interrupts their outburst. Take, eat;

take, drink: the flesh and blood of your offspring in remembrance of a joy you no longer possess; in honor of a sacrifice too terrible to share.

He lays a rice cake on each tongue and follows it with a ruby squirt of vinegar.

You can hardly keep your head or your eyelids up. The evening—the devastating news—your exile from your life-help cottage—have exhausted you beyond mere fatigue, and you collapse over the altar rail. Father H—— lifts your chin and pulls your lip to give you the elements.

The babushka with the heart-shaped face braces you to prevent your rolling to the floor. You behold her from one bloodshot eye, knowing you must seem to her a decrepit old soul: a fish with fading scales and a faint unpleasant smell.

The Eucharist *clicks* in: You see Brice and Elise as preschool children. In stained shorts and jerseys, they dangle a plump Siamese kitten between them and grin like happy little jack-o-lanterns. *Click*. In some adolescent year they are videotaping each other with recorders long since obsolete. Then—*click*—you're gaping at a ticket stub, drawn months later from a jacket pocket, from a ballgame you attended the day before you got word of Brice's death. *Click*. Elise poses saucily in an ice-green gown with a long-stemmed rose between her teeth. *Click*. Much too soon: Elise in khaki.

*O God*, you say under the floating soldier Christ. Forgive, my children, my failure to march ahead of you. . . .

Who helps you to the Sleep Bay on an upper gallery you cannot, in your febrile state, tell. But when you arrive, you find this space larger than the fenced-in confines of a refugee camp, with so many *used adults* milling about that it seems, also, a vast carnival lot. TVs on poles rest at intersections amidst the ranks and files of cots and pallets, most of these showing black-and-white military sitcoms from your girlhood, with a smattering in color from more recent years:

There's *Rin Tin Tin*. There's *F Troop*. There's *Hogan's Heroes*. There's *Sergeant Bilko*. There's *McHale's Navy*. There's *Gomer Pyle, USMC*. There's *M\*A\*S\*H*. There's *China Beach Follies*. There's *My Mama, the Tank*. There's *I Got Mine at Gitmo*. There's *Top Gun, 2022*. There's . . . but they just go on and on, the noise of gunshots, choppers *thwup-thwuping*, IEDs exploding, and combatants crying out in frustration, anger, or pain punctuating almost every soundtrack.

The young woman—anyway, the young *person*—from the Mail Room waves at you across an archipelago of pallets.

Ms. K——! she shouts. Over here, over *here*!

And you stagger toward her through the crowds, past heaped and denuded cots, past old folks and younger folks: some blessedly zonked, some playing card games like Uno, Old Maid, pinochle, or Cut Throat, and some gazing ceiling-ward as if awaiting the Voice of God the Freshly Merciful. One bearded old guy chunks invisible missiles at the actors in *I Got Mine at Gitmo*.

Barely upright, you make it to the person who called to you.

These are your duffels, she says. This is your pallet—unless you'd like to look for something nearer a wall.

Where are the restrooms?

She points. Through there, Ms. K——. You peer down a crooked aisle of bedding at a wall of wrong-way, used-adult orphans obstructing any view of the lavatories she has tried to point out. I know, I know: Just walk that way and ask again.

No, you say. No. You crawl onto the raised pallet—it's resting on a pair of empty ammo crates—and curl up in a fetal hunch between your duffels. The woman, the *person*, touches your shoulder gently, and departs.

Before you can fall asleep, a line of people forms in the aisle. Your pallet rests at its head while its tail snakes back into the depths of the bay like a queue from Depression Era newsreels.

Everybody has photographs or image cubes of their slain warrior children, and as the line advances the people in it squat, kneel, or sit to show them to you, even though you see in each face either Brice's or Elise's, no matter how minimal the resemblance or how weary your vision.

—Very pretty. —Very handsome. —A smart-looking fella. —What a shame you've lost her. —How can he be gone? —Golly, what a smile. . . !

You compliment ten or twelve orphaned parents in this way until your tiredness and the faces of Brice and Elise, rising through the images of these other dead children, make it impossible to go on. Still horizontal, you press your palms to your eyes and shake like a storm-buffed scarecrow.

Leave her alone, somebody says. For Pete's sake, let the woman rest.

A hand shoves your head down into your rough olive-green blanket, but the voice that you attach to the hand's body roars, *Heal, O Lord, heal! Take her hurt away tonight, and torment her no more!*

But you don't want that. You don't. All you want is sleep and the honest-to-God resurrection of three particular persons, but sleep is all you're likely to get. Somebody big perches on the pallet edge and lullabies in a guttural whisper *All the Pretty Little Horses*; he kneads your spine with fingers that feel more like metal bolts than flesh and bone. And despite the Sleep Bay's din and stench (and despite the hole in the middle of your chest), you drift down into a Lost Sea of Consciousness and let go of all pain but a last acrid fuse of heartbreak. . . .

A twin rumble ghosts through the Sleep Bay, an outer one from the old orphans waking to face their pain afresh and an inner one from your complaining gut. You sit up and peer about at this new Reality.

The lavatories have to be packed—so, casting about for a solution, you find a wide-mouthed jar inside one of the crates supporting your pallet. After shaping a tent with your blanket, you relieve your bladder—no easy task—into the jar and stand there amidst the chaos wondering how to proceed.

*Slops! Slops!* cries an electronic voice, and a simulacrum of a person, smaller than the small cruel man who helped transport you from your life-help cottage, rolls through the crowd with a slotted tray hooked to its midsection.

It takes jars, bottles, beakers, and suchlike from other bleary residents and rattles them into the partitioned tray going before it like an antique cowcatcher. You hand over yours uncertainly.

The simulacrum—a *dormitron* or a *refectorian*, depending on its duty du jour—asks what you'd like for breakfast. You recoil at taking anything edible from this rolling slops collector, but say, Some toast, I guess, it really doesn't matter, to keep from stalling it by saying nothing. It rolls on.

Another *refectorian*—for at mealtimes the Sleep Bay becomes the Refectory—cruises up behind a serving cart, the cart a part of its own fabricated anatomy, and lets you fumble at its topmost shelf for a cup of tea and a slice of toast and persimmon jam. Other such simulacra tend to others there in the bay, sometimes dropping plastic crockery or spilling sticky liquids. From a few pallets away, a woman as thin as a spaghetti strap sidles into your space.

What did your children like to eat? she asks.

Ma'am?

Your dead kids—what'd they like to eat? You can get it here, whatever it was. I always do—what mine ate, I mean. I eat it for them and feel connected to them the rest of the hideous day.

Our son liked cold pizza, our daughter even colder fresh fruit.

Want me to get you tidbits of those things?

You hesitate.

The strap-thin woman mumbles into a diamond of perforations on her inner wrist. They're on their way, she tells you afterward.

And so you wind up with two slices of cold garbage-can pizza and a bowl of even colder cantaloupe, pineapple, muskmelon, and kiwi wedges, which you down between bites of pizza. Your benefactor watches in approval, then asks you to tell a breakfast story about Brice and Elise.

*A breakfast story!*

You think first of a morning on which teenager Brice sat slumped at the table, his eyes lazing in their sockets like gravid guinea pigs. Mick directed him to have some juice and cereal, to clean up afterward, and to take his sister to school, but Brice dawdled. Stop dicking around, Mick cried. Then, infuriated, he wrestled Brice from his chair, apparently to frog-march him to the cupboard, but Brice flopped deadweight to the floor; and though Mick twisted, prodded, and even tried to *snatch* him erect, neither his body nor his smirk budged, and he remarked, dryly, that Mick's parenting skills had gone so far south that he'd just resorted to all-out *child abuse*. Stunned, Mick let Brice go and stormed outside. You and Elise exchanged stunned looks of your own.

Come on, the woman prompts again: Every mama has a breakfast story.

So you tell about the time when Brice and Elise, then nine and five, got up early one morning and made Mick and you breakfast in bed: mounds of toast, two eggs each, orange juice, and so on. But thinking it olive oil, they had scrambled the eggs in rancid tuna juice, and despite their hard work and the eggs' lovely sunrise yellowness, you had to throw them out.

The eggs, you say, *not* the kids. Mick and I felt like total Egg Benedict Arnolds. Just like I feel now.

The woman laughs and then purses her lips in sympathy. Good story, Ms. K—. Just remember: You'll *always* feel like that. She grimaces grotesquely, as much for her sake as yours, and places a call via her wrist perforations to somebody in another part of the Refectory.

Meanwhile, the servitors roll on.

Feeling each of your years as a blood-borne needle of sleet, you ride a glass-faced lift to the Chantry level and follow the wives of two sick old men to the Furnace Room, which turns out to be an intensive care unit (ICU) for last-leggers and a crematory for those who don't make it. Indeed, when you arrive, an orderly slouches past pushing a sheeted figure on a gurney toward an oven down a claustrophobia-inducing tributary corridor. You think about following this gurney but instead continue to tag along behind the ICU widows and at length reach the care unit's hub.

The arc of the hub's perimeter is lined with windowed rooms in which you can see the orphans in extremis. They lie here in weirdly tilted beds, attended by dormitrons and tightlipped RNs. Tubes and electrodes sprout from their bodies like odd mechanical fungi. All of them seem to be equipped with oxygen masks, tracheotomies, or respirators. Even over the machines laboring to sustain them, you can hear them breathing from fifty or sixty feet away.

Father H——, a grey silhouette against a luminous white backdrop, stands at the bedside of one such person. His posture tells you he is listening to the patient's whispers or measuring his or her laggard unassisted breaths. The TV set in this room, muted, runs through a succession of familiar images from the War on Worldwide Wickedness: statues toppling, buildings dropping in cascades of dust and smoke, warriors on patrol through rubble-strewn courtyards or past iced-over stone fountains.

The patient couldn't care less. Neither could you, if this enterprise had not also devoured Brice and Elise, many thousands of their contemporaries, and so many civilian *slammies*—as the media now insists on calling civilian natives of foreign war zones—that not even the Pan Imperium can number them.

Mr. Weevil, the director, enters from an outer corridor with several cronies, five or six small men and women, wearing ivory smocks and sneakers. They float past you to a treatment unit. Mr. Weevil slides the glass door open and calls the doctor and his team to the portal to report on the patient's condition.

Dr. S——, a cadaverous Dravidian with lemur eyes, flatly and loudly says that his patient is a near goner whose lungs need help, whose liver has badly deteriorated, whose kidneys have failed, and whose blood, despite a full course of antibiotics, still teems with pernicious microbes.

None of this person's organs retains its original life-sustaining function, says Dr. S——, and he must soon die. I say *must* in the sense of an imminent inevitability, not as a Hippocratic recommendation.

The doctor might just as well have spoken over a PA system. His words echo through the hub like the pronouncement of a god.

Helplessly, you step forward. I'll bet he can still *hear*, you say.

Everybody turns to look. You bear their gazes as the Incredible He-She at an old-time freak show would bear those of a paying crowd.

What? Mr. Weevil says. What did you say?

I said I'll bet he can still *hear*. Hearing is the last of the senses to go, so even this patient may still be able to hear you.

Dr. S——'s mouth quirks sourly. And what good does *that* do him? None. No good at all.

The director and his cronies agree, as do the RNs and the promoted dormitrons at the doctor's back. You dwindle before them like a melting ice statue in a time-lapse video. Amazingly, not one of these obtuse brains gets the poignant underlying import of your observation.

Mr. Weevil turns to address the doctor: Every life has huge merit, of course, but we *really* need that bed. *Carry on!* He and his smock-clad retinue exit the intensive care hub while Dr. S—— and *his* team fall back into the treatment unit to await the convenient inevitable.

Appalled, you walk about the hub in rings of increasing size until Father H——comes out and hails you as he might a lost friend. Ah, Ms. K——, what a surprise and a treat to see you!

What day is it, Padre?

Friday—another *good* Friday—why do you ask?

You hear the stress on *good*, but not the Easter-designating capital G that would turn your fugue into an enacted allegory. You note that it's been little more than twelve hours since two cruel stooges informed you of Elise's death.

And a little over two years since you learned of Brice's, he says gently.

You smile and ask after the women who journeyed to the Furnace Room to visit their spouses.

Their hearts will grow heavier soon, Father H—— says. Given their ages, how could they not?

They'll die without seeing the war's end.

*War Is Peace*, Orwell said. Besides, who will? Who sees anything well finished, even one's own life? It's little different from those medieval stonemasons who worked on cathedrals.

I don't like your analogy, you tell him.

Father H—— laughs heartily. Of course you don't: it stinks.

Moments later, he leads you to the mouth of a nearby tunnel.

Care to visit the ovens, Ms. K——?

You like this question less than you did his cathedral analogy because it suggests an analogy even more distasteful. But what else do you have to do?

Okay.

As you walk, the father offers you a rice cake and an ampoule of red-wine vinegar from a communion kit sewn into his jacket lining. For your spiritual sustenance, he says, but you bemusedly shake your head.

Two gurneys trundle up behind you, one pushed by a dormitron, the other by a young woman in uniform. To let them pass in tandem, you press your backs to opposite walls of the tunnel. The first gurney takes a corridor to the left; the second, bearing not only a body but a casket draped in a flag of the nation's newly adopted colors, swings right. You raise an eyebrow at the father.

Vinegar Peace cremates our war dead as well as wrong-way orphans, he explains. Which way would you like to go?

You answer by angling right. Far down this corridor you see a wide

brick apron before double crematory doors and ranks of scarlet-draped caskets before these doors. An honor guard in full-dress stands at formal ease to one side of the tunnel; a military choir on crepe-decorated risers to the other.

Both contingents await you in this incarnadine cul-de-sac; in fact, when you have almost drawn close enough to read the soldiers' nametags, they crack to attention and a pitch pipe sounds. They then begin to sing, the expanded honor guard and the choir, as if triggered by your arrival as auditors. You recognize the melody as a halt-footed variation on an old hymn's tune:

*If we were ever sorry,  
Oh, we would never tell—  
We're gravely in a hurry  
To sleep at last in hell.*

**"Pro patria mori"**  
*Is our true warrior's cry.  
We never, ever worry;  
We boldly spit and die.*

*Out for patriot glory,  
Brave maid and gallant stud,  
We all revere Bold Gory—  
Its Red, its Wine, its Blood!*

The choristers conclude fortissimo and stand at ease again. The Red, Wine, and Blood—Bold Gory—has recently replaced the Red, White, and Blue—Old Glory—, and these soldiers gladly hymn the new banner's praises.

Two members of the honor guard open the double doors of the oven, and Father H—— nods you forward, as if accustomed to this ritual.

Go in? you ask him. Really?

Just for a look-see. You might not think so, but it's an honor, their approving you for an impromptu tour.

Why me?

Most young enlistees have living parents. You're a proxy.

A soldier yanks the scarlet banner from a coffin and brings it to you as if to throw it over your shoulders. Its stars and stripes are mutedly visible as different shades of red. You lift a hand, palm outward. No thank you.

Our dead would wish us to robe you in it, the soldier says.

You count sixteen coffins—one of them minus its patriotic drapery. Who are your dead today? you wonder aloud.

Sixteen trainees in a reconstructed Osprey Vertical Takeoff/Landing Aircraft, he says. It crashed a half mile from camp, the third bird this year. He again offers the scarlet flag.

No, I can't. I'm partial to the old version, even at its foulest.

The soldier courteously withdraws, to re-drape the naked coffin.

Father H—— takes your arm and leads you straightway into the oven.

The Cold Room had ice effigies. The Furnace Room—or this part of its

crematory extension—has a cindery floor and dunes of ash. When its doors close behind you, you stand in the grey hemisphere like snow-globe figures, lit by thin skylights. Black scales etch continents and islands on the walls, and the sooty dunes, when you move, suck at you like whirlpools. The furnace scares you. It seems both an execution chamber and a tomb, full of drifting human fallout.

I thought the ash and bone fragments were collected to give to the families, and that everything else went up the smokestack.

Some ovens work more efficiently than others, the father replies.

You walk deeper into this peculiar space and kneel before an ashen dune. You run your hands into it and let its motes sift through your fingers like desiccated rain. You rub your wrists and arms with it. You pour its greyness over your head in a sort of baptism, a dry baptism befitting your age and orphanhood. You scrub it into your clothes and run your tongue around your mouth to taste its grit.

Father H— breaks a dozen ampoules of red-wine vinegar over the ashes before you and stirs the bitter into the bleak. He shapes a pie from this mixture and urges you to follow suit. You obey. After a while, you've made a dozen or so together, but still must make a dozen more for the unfed soldiers in the tunnel. Kneeling, you work side by side to accomplish that task.

Weeks go by before you visit the Melancholarium.

Father H— has told you that it's a memory room that only two people at a time may enter: an orphaned couple, or the only surviving orphan and a person of his or her choice. No one may enter alone, or in a party of three or more. None of these rules makes much sense, but little about Vinegar Peace ever does, even if it sometimes seems to have a coherent underlying principle of organization that you can't fathom owing to an innate personal failing.

Meanwhile, you've grown used to the noisy Sleep Bay, learned when to visit the crowded jakes, perfected the art of getting servitors to do your bidding, and made enough *friends* to feel—well, if not *connected*, at least not entirely estranged from the protocols of what passes for normal life here. You no longer bolt up when bombs go off at Fort Pugnicoise (where many of the recruits for the War on Worldwide Wickedness train), or when air-raid sirens wail in the galleries, or when some of the older orphans sidle up to your cot at night and plead, *Take me home, take me home*. Even the twilight influx of dispossessed oldsters, addle-wits with confusion writ large in their pupils, has ceased to faze you. After all, they'll adjust . . . maybe.

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Then a dormitron sporting Henry Kissinger glasses and nose gives you a pass to visit the Melancholarium.

The name itself sabotages the place. Just hearing it, who'd want to go there? You, indeed, would rather return to your life-help cottage in Sour Thicket. Vinegar Peace isn't a concentration camp, but neither is it a Sun City spa. It's a training facility for people with little time to make use of that training in the Real World, which in your opinion no longer exists.

Choose somebody to go with you, the dormitron says.

You pick Ms. B——, the strap-thin woman who asked you to tell her a breakfast story, and one morning in your second month of residency, the two of you ride a lift to the fifth level and walk together to a tall cylindrical kiosk where a familiar-looking young person, probably female, seats you next to each other at a console and fits you both with pullover goggles.

You walk side by side into the Melancholarium. Now, though, Ms. B—— is no longer Ms. B—— but your late husband Mick, whose hand you hold as you approach the gurney on which Elise lies in a pair of jeans and a blue chambray shirt open at the collar. Her clothing is so blatantly neither a gown nor a full dress uniform that the simplicity of her look—her sweet girlishness—briefly stops your breath, as hers is stopped. You reach to touch her. Mick seizes your wrist, not to prevent you but instead to guide your fingers to Elise's arm, which you both clutch for as long as you have now endured in this grand human depository. Or so it oddly seems.

Elise's red-tinged hair, which the military cut short, now hangs behind her off the gurney. It sparkles like a sequined veil. The expression on her face suggests neither terror nor pain, but serenity; and if you addressed her, saying, *Elise, it's time to get up, come out to the porch to see the sun shining on the spider webs in the grass*, you believe with the same soft ferocity that you once believed in God that she will obey—that she'll open her eyes, sit up, and embrace you briefly before striding out of the Melancholarium into the stolen remainder of her life.

You kiss Elise's brow. Leaning across her, you give her the hug that she'd give you if only the same green power seethed there. Her body has a knobby hardness that would estrange you from her if you didn't love her so much. All your pity re-collects and flows from your bent frame into her unyielding one. She has the frail perdurability of Cold Room effigies—but none of their alienness—and so she has finally become yours, although neither you nor anybody else can own her now. When her smoke rises through the crematory flue, it won't dissipate until your smoke also rises and clasps her last white particles to yours. Then both clouds will drift away together.

You step back. Mick gives you room. You want to freeze this tableau and visit it like a window decorator, keeping its centerpiece—Elise—intact but endlessly rearranging the furniture and flowers. You kiss her brow again, hold her hands, and finger the runnels in her jeans.

You undo the buttons next to her heart to confirm a report that three high-caliber rounds inflicted her *non-sustainable* injuries. You find and examine them with a clinical tenderness. You must know *everything*, even the worst, and you rejoice in the tameness of her fatal mutilation.

Joyce, Mick says, the first time anyone has spoken your given name in so long that it jars like a stranger's. *Are you okay?*

You embrace, leaning into each other. Of course, it isn't really Mick holding you upright in the vivid deceit of the Melancholiarium, but so what, so what?

You pull back from his image and murmur, *Mick, her hands . . .*

*What about them?*

*They're so cold, colder than I thought possible.*

Yes, Mick says, smiling, *but if you rub them, they warm up.*

On your journey back to the Sleep Bay, you tell Ms. B——, Mick would never have said that. That was you.

Ms. B—— says, Well, I've never seen such a pretty kid.

You should have seen Brice.

Stop it. I was just being polite. *You* should've seen *mine*: absolute lovelies fed into the chipper by tin-men with no guts or gadgets.

You don't reply because you notice a short tunnel to a door with a red neon sign flashing over it: **EXIT** and then the same word inside a circle with a slash through it. You think about detouring down this tunnel and even try to pull Ms. B—— along with you. She resists.

Stop it, she says. You can check out whenever you feel like it. Just don't try to leave. Don't you know that by now?

I've heard there's an escape, you say. A way to get out alive.

*That's* not it, Ms. B—— says, nodding at the flashing **EXIT/DON'T EXIT** sign.

Don't you even want to hear?

Enlist? Is that it? Sign up to wage war on the wicked? Well, that's a crock too.

I'm sure it is.

Okay, then—what is it, your secret way to get out?

Adoption, you tell her. The padre says that if a soldier with six tours adopts you, you're no longer a wrong-way orphan and you can leave.

Ms. B—— regards you as if you've proposed sticking nasturtiums down the barrel of an enemy soldier's rifle. Oh, I've heard that too, it's a fat load of bunkum.

You don't reply, but you also don't go down the tunnel to try the door with the contradictory flashing messages. You return with your *friend* to the Sleep Bay without raising the subject again.

But it makes sense, doesn't it? A decent orphanage adopts out its charges. If you believe, just *believe*, somewhere there's a compassionate Brice or Elise, a person who's survived six tours and wants nothing more than to rescue some poor wrong-way orphan from terminal warehousing. Such people do exist. They exist to lead you from Vinegar Peace to a place of unmerited Milk and Honey.

That night, huddled on your cot amid the hubbub in the Sleep Bay, you envision a woman very like Elise sitting with you on a porch in late autumn or early winter. You sit shivering under scarlet lap robes, while this person whispers a soothing tale and tirelessly rubs your age-freckled hands. ○

# 26 MONKEYS, ALSO THE ABYSS

Kij Johnson

**Kij Johnson is a technical writer living in Seattle. She is an associate director and a member of the board of directors for the Center for the Study of Science Fiction based in Lawrence, Kansas, and a final juror for the Theodore H. Sturgeon Award. Her most recent project is a collection of nonfiction essays about rock climbing and bouldering, but she plans to get back to novels soon. Kij owns a cat who, she assures us, is not the least bit monkey-like.**

1.  
**A**imee's big trick is that she makes twenty-six monkeys vanish onstage.

2.  
She pushes out a claw-foot bathtub and asks audience members to come up and inspect it. The people climb in and look underneath, touch the white enamel, run their hands along the little lions' feet. When they're done, four chains are lowered from the stage's fly space. Aimee secures them to holes drilled along the tub's lip and gives a signal, and the bathtub is hoisted ten feet into the air.

She sets a stepladder next to it. She claps her hands and the twenty-six monkeys onstage run up the ladder one after the other and jump into the bathtub. The bathtub shakes as each monkey thuds in among the others. The audience can see heads, legs, tails; but eventually every monkey settles and the bathtub is still again. Zeb is always the last monkey up the ladder. As he climbs into the bathtub, he makes a humming boom deep in his chest. It fills the stage.

And then there's a flash of light, two of the chains fall off, and the bathtub swings down to expose its interior.

Empty.

3.

They turn up later, back at the tour bus. There's a smallish dog door, and in the hours before morning the monkeys let themselves in, alone or in small groups, and get themselves glasses of water from the tap. If more than one returns at the same time, they murmur a bit among themselves, like college students meeting in the dorm halls after bar time. A few sleep on the sofa and at least one likes to be on the bed, but most of them wander back to their cages. There's a little grunting as they rearrange their blankets and soft toys, and then sighs and snoring. Aimee doesn't really sleep until she hears them all come in.

Aimee has no idea what happens to them in the bathtub, or where they go, or what they do before the soft click of the dog door opening. This bothers her a lot.

4.

Aimee has had the act for three years now. She was living in a month-by-month furnished apartment under a flight path for the Salt Lake City airport. She was hollow, as if something had chewed a hole in her body and the hole had grown infected.

There was a monkey act at the Utah State Fair. She felt a sudden and totally out-of-character urge to see it. Afterward, with no idea why, she walked up to the owner and said, "I have to buy this."

He nodded. He sold it to her for a dollar, which he told her was the price he had paid four years before.

Later, when the paperwork was filled out, she asked him, "How can you leave them? Won't they miss you?"

"You'll see, they're pretty autonomous," he said. "Yeah, they'll miss me and I'll miss them. But it's time, they know that."

He smiled at his new wife, a small woman with laugh lines and a vervet hanging from one hand. "We're ready to have a garden," she said.

He was right. The monkeys missed him. But they also welcomed her, each monkey politely shaking her hand as she walked into what was now her bus.

5.

Aimee has: a nineteen-year-old tour bus packed with cages that range in size from parrot-sized (for the vervets) to something about the size of a pickup bed (for all the macaques); a stack of books on monkeys ranging from *All About Monkeys* to *Evolution and Ecology of Baboon Societies*; some sequined show costumes, a sewing machine, and a bunch of Carhartts and tees; a stack of show posters from a few years back that say 24 MONKEYS! FACE THE ABYSS; a battered sofa in a virulent green plaid; and a boyfriend who helps with the monkeys.

She cannot tell you why she has any of these, not even the boyfriend, whose name is Geof, whom she met in Billings seven months ago. Aimee

has no idea where anything comes from any more: she no longer believes that anything makes sense, even though she can't stop hoping.

The bus smells about as you'd expect a bus full of monkeys to smell; though after a show, after the bathtub trick but before the monkeys all return, it also smells of cinnamon, which is the tea Aimee sometimes drinks.

## 6.

For the act, the monkeys do tricks, or dress up in outfits and act out hit movies—*The Matrix* is very popular, as is anything where the monkeys dress up like little orcs. The maned monkeys, the lion-tails and the colobuses, have a lion-tamer act, with the old capuchin female, Pango, dressed in a red jacket and carrying a whip and a small chair. The chimpanzee (whose name is Mimi, and no, she is not a monkey) can do actual sleight of hand; she's not very good, but she's the best Chimp Pulling A Coin From Someone's Ear in the world.

The monkeys also can build a suspension bridge out of wooden chairs and rope, make a four-tier champagne fountain, and write their names on a whiteboard.

The monkey show is very popular, with a schedule of 127 shows this year at fairs and festivals across the Midwest and Great Plains. Aimee could do more, but she likes to let everyone have a couple of months off at Christmas.

## 7.

This is the bathtub act:

Aimee wears a glittering purple-black dress designed to look like a scanty magician's robe. She stands in front of a scrim lit deep blue and scattered with stars. The monkeys are ranged in front of her. As she speaks they undress and fold their clothes into neat piles. Zeb sits on his stool to one side, a white spotlight shining straight down to give him a shadowed look.

She raises her hands.

"These monkeys have made you laugh, and made you gasp. They have created wonders for you and performed mysteries. But there is a final mystery they offer you—the strangest, the greatest of all."

She parts her hands suddenly, and the scrim goes transparent and is lifted away, revealing the bathtub on a raised dais. She walks around it, running her hand along the tub's curves.

"It's a simple thing, this bathtub. Ordinary in every way, mundane as breakfast. In a moment I will invite members of the audience up to let you prove this for yourselves.

"But for the monkeys it is also a magical object. It allows them to travel—no one can say where. Not even I—" she pauses—"can tell you this. Only the monkeys know, and they share no secrets.

"Where do they go? Into heaven, foreign lands, other worlds—or some dark abyss? We cannot follow. They will vanish before our eyes, vanish from this most ordinary of things."

And after the bathtub is inspected and she has told the audience that there will be no final spectacle in the show—"It will be hours before they

return from their secret travels”—and called for applause for them, she gives the cue.

8.

Aimee's monkeys:

- 2 siamangs, a mated couple
- 2 squirrel monkeys, though they're so active they might as well be twice as many
- 2 vervets
- a guenon, who is probably pregnant, though it's still too early to tell for sure. Aimee has no idea how this happened
- 3 rhesus monkeys. They juggle a little
- a capuchin female named Pango
- a crested macaque, 3 snow monkeys (one quite young), and a Java macaque. Despite the differences, they have formed a small troop and like to sleep together
- a chimpanzee, who is not actually a monkey
- a surly gibbon
- 2 marmosets
- a golden tamarin; a cotton-top tamarin
- a proboscis monkey
- red and black colubuses
- Zeb

9.

Aimee thinks Zeb might be a de Brazza's guenon, except that he's so old that he has lost almost all his hair. She worries about his health, but he insists on staying in the act. By now all he's really up for is the final rush to the bathtub, and for him it is more of a stroll. The rest of the time, he sits on a stool that is painted orange and silver and watches the other monkeys, looking like an aging impresario watching his *Swan Lake* from the wings. Sometimes she gives him things to hold, such as a silver hoop through which the squirrel monkeys jump.

10.

No one knows how the monkeys vanish or where they go. Sometimes they return holding foreign coins or durian fruit, or wearing pointed Moroccan slippers. Every so often one returns pregnant or accompanied by a new monkey. The number of monkeys is not constant.

"I just don't get it," Aimee keeps asking Geof, as if he has any idea. Aimee never knows anything any more. She's been living without any certainties, and this one thing—well, the whole thing, the fact the monkeys get along so well and know how to do card tricks and just turned up in her life and vanish from the bathtub; *everything*—she coasts with that most of the time, but every so often, when she feels her life is wheeling without brakes down a long hill, she starts poking at this again.

Geof trusts the universe a lot more than Aimee does, trusts that things make sense and that people can love, and therefore he doesn't need the same proofs. "You could ask them," he says.

## 11.

Aimee's boyfriend:

Geof is not at all what Aimee expected from a boyfriend. For one thing, he's fifteen years younger than Aimee, twenty-eight to her forty-three. For another, he's sort of quiet. For a third, he's gorgeous, silky thick hair pulled into a shoulder-length ponytail, shaved sides showing off his strong jaw line. He smiles a lot, but he doesn't laugh very often.

Geof has a degree in history, which means that he was working in a bike-repair shop when she met him at the Montana Fair. Aimee never has much to do right after the show, so when he offered to buy her a beer she said yes. And then it was four AM and they were kissing in the bus, monkeys letting themselves in and getting ready for bed; and Aimee and Geof made love.

In the morning over breakfast, the monkeys came up one by one and shook his hand solemnly, and then he was with the band, so to speak. She helped him pick up his cameras and clothes and the surfboard his sister had painted for him one year as a Christmas present. There's no room for the surfboard, so it's suspended from the ceiling. Sometimes the squirrel monkeys hang out there and peek over the side.

Aimee and Geof never talk about love.

Geof has a class-C driver's license, but this is just lagniappe.

## 12.

Zeb is dying.

Generally speaking, the monkeys are remarkably healthy and Aimee can handle their occasional sinus infections and gastrointestinal ailments. For anything more difficult, she's found a couple of communities online and some helpful specialists.

But Zeb's coughing some, and the last of his fur is falling out. He moves very slowly and sometimes has trouble remembering simple tasks. When the show was up in St. Paul six months ago, a Como Zoo biologist came to visit the monkeys, complimented her on their general health and well-being, and at her request looked Zeb over.

"How old is he?" the biologist, Gina, asked.

"I don't know," Aimee said. The man she bought the show from hadn't known either.

"I'll tell you then," Gina said. "He's old. I mean, seriously old."

Senile dementia, arthritis, a heart murmur. No telling when, Gina said. "He's a happy monkey," she said. "He'll go when he goes."

## 13.

Aimee thinks a lot about this. What happens to the act when Zeb's dead? Through each show he sits calm and poised on his bright stool. She feels he is somehow at the heart of the monkeys' amiability and cleverness. She keeps thinking that he is somehow the reason the monkeys all vanish and return.

Because there's always a reason for everything, isn't there? Because if there isn't a reason for even *one* thing, like how you can get sick, or your husband stop loving you or people you love die—then there's no reason for anything. So there must be reasons. Zeb's as good a guess as any.

14.

What Aimee likes about this life:

It doesn't mean anything. She doesn't live anywhere. Her world is thirty-eight feet and 127 shows long and currently twenty-six monkeys deep. This is manageable.

Fairs don't mean anything, either. Her tiny world travels within a slightly larger world, the identical, interchangeable fairs. Sometimes the only things that cue Aimee to the town she's in are the nighttime temperatures and the shape of the horizon: badlands, mountains, plains, or city skyline.

Fairs are as artificial as titanium knees: the carnival, the animal barns, the stock-car races, the concerts, the smell of burnt sugar and funnel cakes and animal bedding. Everything is an overly bright symbol for something real, food or pets or hanging out with friends. None of this has anything to do with the world Aimee used to live in, the world from which these people visit.

She has decided that Geof is like the rest of it: temporary, meaningless. Not for loving.

15.

These are some ways Aimee's life might have come apart:

a. She might have broken her ankle a few years ago, and gotten a bone infection that left her on crutches for ten months, and in pain for longer.

b. Her husband might have fallen in love with his admin and left her.

c. She might have been fired from her job in the same week she found out her sister had colon cancer.

d. She might have gone insane for a time and made a series of questionable choices that left her alone in a furnished apartment in a city she picked out of the atlas.

Nothing is certain. You can lose everything. Eventually, even at your luckiest, you will die and then you *will* lose it all. When you are a certain age or when you have lost certain things and people, Aimee's crippling grief will make a terrible poisoned dark sense.

16.

Aimee has read up a lot, so she knows how strange all this is.

There aren't any locks on the cages. The monkeys use them as bedrooms, places to store their special possessions and get away from the others when they want some privacy. Much of the time, however, they are loose in the bus or poking around outside.

Right now, three monkeys are sitting on the bed playing a game where they match colored cards. Others are playing with skeins of bright wool, or rolling around on the floor, or poking at a piece of wood with a screwdriver, or climbing on Aimee and Geof and the battered sofa. Some of the monkeys are crowded around the computer watching kitten videos on a pirated wireless connection.

The black colubus is stacking children's wooden blocks on the kitchenette's table. He brought them back one night a couple of weeks ago, and

since then he's been trying to make an arch. After two weeks and Aimee's showing him repeatedly how a keystone works, he still hasn't figured it out, but he's still patiently trying.

Geof's reading a novel out loud to Pango, who watches the pages as if she's reading along. Sometimes she points to a word and looks up at him with her bright eyes, and he repeats it to her, smiling, and then spells it out.

Zeb is sleeping in his cage. He crept in there at dusk, fluffed up his toys and his blanket, and pulled the door closed behind him. He does this a lot lately.

## 17.

Aimee's going to lose Zeb, and then what? What happens to the other monkeys? Twenty-six monkeys is a lot of monkeys, but they all like each other. No one except maybe a zoo or a circus can keep that many monkeys, and she doesn't think anyone else will let them sleep wherever they like or watch kitten videos. And if Zeb's not there, where will they go, those nights when they can no longer drop through the bathtub and into their mystery? And she doesn't even know whether it *is* Zeb, whether he is the cause of this, or that's just her flailing for reasons again.

And Aimee? She'll lose her safe artificial world: the bus, the identical fairs, the meaningless boyfriend. The monkeys. And then what?

## 18.

Just a few months after she bought the act, when she didn't care much about whether she lived or died, she followed the monkeys up the ladder in the closing act. Zeb raced up the ladder, stepped into the bathtub and stood, lungs filling for his great call. And she ran up after him. She glimpsed the bathtub's interior, the monkeys tidily sardined in, scrambling to get out of her way as they realized what she was doing. She hopped into the hole they made for her, curled up tight.

This only took an instant. Zeb finished his breath, boomed it out. There was a flash of light, she heard the chains release, and felt the bathtub swing down, monkeys shifting around her.

She fell the ten feet alone. Her ankle twisted when she hit the stage but she managed to stay upright. The monkeys were gone again.

There was an awkward silence. It wasn't one of her more successful performances.

## 19.

Aimee and Geof walk through the midway at the Salina Fair. She's hungry and doesn't want to cook, so they're looking for somewhere that sells \$4.50 hotdogs and \$3.25 Cokes, and suddenly Geof turns to Aimee and says, "This is bullshit. Why don't we go into town? Have real food. Act like normal people."

So they do: pasta and wine at a place called Irina's Villa. "You're always asking why they go," Geof says, a bottle and a half in. His eyes are an indeterminate blue-gray, but in this light they look black and very warm. "See, I don't think we're ever going to find out what happens. But I don't

think that's the real question, anyway. Maybe the question is, why do they come back?"

Aimee thinks of the foreign coins, the wood blocks, the wonderful things they bring home. "I don't know," she says. "Why *do* they come back?"

Later that night, back at the bus, Geof says, "Wherever they go, yeah, it's cool. But see, here's my theory." He gestures to the crowded bus with its clutter of toys and tools. The two tamarins have just come in, and they're sitting on the kitchenette counter, heads close as they examine some new small thing. "They like visiting wherever it is, sure. But this is their home. Everyone likes to come home sooner or later."

"If they have a home," Aimee says.

"Everyone has a home, even if they don't believe in it," Geof says.

20.

That night, when Geof's asleep curled up around one of the macaques, Aimee kneels by Zeb's cage. "Can you at least show me?" she asks. "Please? Before you go?"

Zeb is an indeterminate lump under his baby-blue blanket, but he gives a little sigh and climbs slowly out of his cage. He takes her hand with his own hot leathery paw, and they walk out the door into the night.

The back lot where all the trailers and buses are parked is quiet, only a few voices still audible from behind curtained windows. The sky is blue-black and scattered with stars. The moon shines straight down on them, shadowing Zeb's face. His eyes when he looks up seem bottomless.

The bathtub is backstage, already on its wheeled dais waiting for the next show. The space is nearly pitch dark, lit by some red EXIT signs and a single sodium-vapor away off to one side. Zeb walks her up to the tub, lets her run her hands along its cold curves and the lions' paws, and shows her the dimly lit interior.

And then he heaves himself onto the dais and over the tub lip. She stands beside him, looking down. He lifts himself upright and gives a boom. And then he drops flat and the bathtub is empty.

She saw it, him vanishing. He was there and then he was gone. But there was nothing to see, no gate, no flickering reality or soft pop as air snapped in to fill the vacated space. It still doesn't make sense, but it's the answer that Zeb has.

He's already back at the bus when she gets there, already buried under his blanket and wheezing in his sleep.

21.

Then one day:

Everyone is backstage. Aimee is finishing her makeup, and Geof is double-checking everything. The monkeys are sitting neatly in a circle in the dressing room, as if trying to keep their bright vests and skirts from creasing. Zeb sits in the middle, Pango beside him in her little green sequined outfit. They grunt a bit, then lean back. One after the other, the rest of the monkeys crawl forward and shake his hand, and then hers. She nods, like a small queen at a flower show.

That night, Zeb doesn't run up the ladder. He stays on his stool and it's

Pango who is the last monkey up the ladder, who climbs into the bathtub and gives a screech. Aimee has been wrong to think Zeb had to be the reason for what is happening with the monkeys, but she was so sure of it that she missed all the cues. But Geof didn't miss a thing, so when Pango screeches, he hits the flash powder. The flash, the empty bathtub.

Zeb stands on his stool, bowing like an impresario called onstage for the curtain call. When the curtain drops for the last time, he reaches up to be lifted. Aimee cuddles him as they walk back to the bus, Geof's arm around them both.

Zeb falls asleep with them that night, between them in the bed. When she wakes up in the morning, he's back in his cage with his favorite toy. He doesn't wake up. The monkeys cluster at the bars peeking in.

Aimee cries all day. "It's okay," Geof says.

"It's not about Zeb," she sobs.

"I know," he says. "It's okay. Come home, Aimee."

But she's already there. She just hadn't noticed.

## 22.

Here's the trick to the bathtub trick. There is no trick. The monkeys pour across the stage and up the ladder and into the bathtub and they settle in and then they vanish. The world is full of strange things, things that make no sense, and maybe this is one of them. Maybe the monkeys choose not to share, that's cool, who can blame them.

Maybe this is the monkeys' mystery, how they found other monkeys that ask questions and try things, and figured out a way to all be together to share it. Maybe Aimee and Geof are really just houseguests in the monkeys' world: they are there for a while and then they leave.

## 23.

Six weeks later, a man walks up to Aimee as she and Geof kiss after a show. He's short, pale, balding. He has the shell-shocked look of a man eaten hollow from the inside. She knows the look.

"I need to buy this," he says.

Aimee nods. "I know you do."

She sells it to him for a dollar.

Three months later, Aimee and Geof get their first houseguest in their apartment in Bellingham. They hear the refrigerator close and come out to the kitchen to find Pango pouring orange juice from a carton.

They send her home with a pinochle deck. ○



Although Brian Stableford has been very busy translating a series of classic French scientific romances for Black Coat Press, including books by Albert Robida, Felix Bodin, Gustave Le Rouge, and Charles Derennes, he has managed to find the time to write the third novella concerning the alternate adventures of some famous sixteenth century personalities. In his latest tale, he explores the mysteries of . . .

# THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

Brian Stableford

*In "The Plurality of Worlds" (Asimov's, August 2006), set in 1572 during the reign of Queen Jane, Thomas Digges piloted an ether-ship designed by John Dee into orbit around the Earth, in order to discover whether ether could sustain life as air did. In making that test, Digges' body was invaded by a tenuous "ethereal" life-form, which appointed itself as his guide when the ship was captured by the insectile inhabitants of the moon. Its crew—including Francis Drake, Walter Raleigh, John Field and Edward de Vere—were subsequently sent by hyperetheric transporter to the center of the galaxy, where they encountered the molluskan Great Fleshcores, rulers of a vast invertebrate empire. Digges was informed by a rogue endoskeletal robot, however, that the empire was not as steady as the Fleshcores claimed, and that humans would not be without allies of their own exotic kind if their unexpected discovery proved to be the turning point that would shatter its integrity.*

*In "Doctor Muffet's Island" (Asimov's, March 2007), set in 1577, Francis Drake had returned to terrestrial exploration, bitterly disappointed by the fact that he was generally thought to be mad because he insisted that the adventure of the ether-ship's crew was real rather than illusory—as both Digges and Field, the only other known survivors, had publicly claimed. Having seen the geography of the globe from space, he hoped to discover new possessions for the English crown in the Pacific, but was disappointed to find that he had been preceded by Humphrey Gilbert and the Paracelsian*

*physician Thomas Muffet—and, it transpired, Walter Raleigh, strangely transformed by a lunar encounter with a spider. According to Raleigh, arachnids, like humans, were misfits within the galactic empire, and had their own plans for the destiny of the newly complicated scheme of things.*

*Meanwhile, back in England. . .*

# 1

Edward Kelley staggered through the door of the inn bearing the sign of the Black Bear just as the last remnant of twilight faded away. His legs had not let him down, in spite of all the miles he had walked, but his head felt as if it might explode. It was not so much an ache as a sensation of terrible unease. The sensation was inconstant but incessant; its peaks of effect had been increasing by degrees for a fortnight, and the present one was the worst yet. He had hoped that he might obtain some release when he had given the black stone and the red powder to his wife, in order that she might take them to Mortlake by river barge, but it seemed that the angels would not let him go, whether he had their gifts about his person or not, and that their demands would not cease once he had delivered the stone safely into John Dee's hands.

It had been a wise decision to let Ann take the stone; he was the one for whom the searchers would be looking, and his was the unfortunately distinctive description they would have been given. Ann would be safer on her own than in his company. It appeared, however, that he was no longer capable of renouncing the stone even if he had wanted to; having entered into a rapport with its strange inhabitants, his soul was captive. He had to get to Mortlake too, come hell, high water or all the Puritan wrath in England.

He looked around the inn's pot-room warily. The hour was not late, the equinox having only just passed, but he doubted that any further travelers would come in after him. The Black Bear was less than fifty miles from London, but the road was dangerous after dark, so honest men would have made shift to take shelter as the sun set. Kelley had only a few copper coins to steal, but footpads would not know that, and might well give him an extra tap on the head for having put them to the trouble of seizing a near-empty purse, so there was a certain relief in reaching shelter—but that very fact would expose him to new dangers.

There were eight men foregathered in the room. Four of them, forming a party that might have been pre-arranged in Bristol or Bath, were well-dressed men of affairs, who would doubtless be sleeping in a private room. Three others had similarly gathered on a bench behind a rickety table, but Kelley judged from their body language that they had not set out to travel as a group; they had flocked together instinctively after arriving separately or meeting on the road. Their common cause, he judged—the horrid feeling in his head had not affected his fortune-teller's eye—was further compounded by their active avoidance of a short, wiry man of fifty or thereabouts, who was sitting alone.

Kelley examined the pariah more carefully while he crossed the room to the ridiculously small servery, whose hatch was not much bigger than a loophole in a castle wall. The stranger wore a traveling-cloak, but it did not conceal the hem of his monastic habit. He had not taken off his broad-brimmed hat, but anyone, given the other circumstance, would have guessed that it concealed his tonsure.

Kelley bought a tankard of small beer and half a loaf. The purchase removed the last of his coin from his purse, but he was hungry and thirsty as well as sick in the head, and could not think of conserving his resources. He hesitated for a moment thereafter, but only for a moment. The sight of the monk offered him a slight chance of finding shelter for the following night; Romanists had refuges of their own. Although there was evidently no safe house within striking distance of the Black Bear, tonight's pariah would probably be able to find much warmer hospitality further along the London Road. The day after next, God willing, Kelley would reach Mortlake, and his fate would be in the hands of John Dee; it would surely be worth his while to play the Catholic for a little while.

The little man looked up at him in slight surprise as Kelley dropped his traveling-sack on the floor and took a seat on the same bench. Pale blue eyes studied the contours of Kelley's felt bonnet—which Kelley was as careful to wear indoors as the Romanist was to keep his hat on. They muttered a simultaneous formula of greeting, but the monk fell silent thereafter, obviously unprepared to say another word to a man he did not know.

Queen Jane's parliament operated a policy of "freedom of conscience," which meant that every man in England was entitled to follow the Roman faith if he wished, but the Archbishop of Canterbury was a fervent Puritan, and the power of zealous Protest was gaining ground with every day that passed. England had so far escaped the wars of religion that were consuming the continent, but that was because there was little possibility of organized resistance to the Puritan tide, least of all from the Catholics. Ever since Mary Tudor's assassination, shortly after she had landed in Plymouth with the alleged intention of raising an army to seize the throne, the Reformers had been cock-a-hoop; many Catholics had fled the realm. The Year of Our Lord 1582 was not a good time to be a Romanist, or even a High Churchman, in England.

Kelley's powers of intuition were not ingenious enough, in spite of any angelic enhancement of which the nagging vertigo might be a side-effect, to tell him whether the monk might be a Dominican friar or a homeless Benedictine, but he did not think that he could be expected to know the difference even if he really were a Catholic. After a decent interval, while the conversation at the gentlemen's table was uproarious enough to drown out what he said, Kelley leaned forward and said: "Will you hear my confession, Father?"

The little man stared at him for ten or twelve seconds before replying, as Kelley had hoped: "Not here."

"On the road, then," Kelley said, "when we leave in the morning—assuming that you're London-bound."

The wary monk would not even confirm that he was London-bound, as

yet. "What are you?" he asked, instead. He spoke with a slight accent, as if he had spent long years out of his native England.

"My name is Edward Talbot, sir, and I'm a lettered man. I'll freely admit that I wear my cap indoors to hide the fact that I have no ears, and I won't deny the sin that cost me their excision—but that's not why I'm a fugitive now." *I'm on the side of the angels, at any rate*, he thought, bitterly.

He had taken a fancy to the stone when he had found it on Northwick Hill and gladly adopted it as a pretended skrying-glass, to aid him in his trade, before the angels first appeared within it and made it all too real. Like a fool, he had been gluttoned with delight when he first realized that he really did have a power—a gift, he had thought it—but he had reason now to suspect that any secrets the angels might condescend to impart to a man such as him would be as useless as they were bewildering, while the price they would demand in return was usurious. All things considered, he'd rather have thrown the stone away than attracted the attention of the Church Militant, in spite of the hints the angels had thrown out regarding the miraculous quality of the red powder, but it was too late now. Field's men were after him, and he was in desperate need of angelic help, if any were available.

The little man glanced left and right to make sure that no one was eavesdropping, then whispered: "Is it the hounds that are after you?"

"No," Kelley told him, with regretful honesty, "it's the foxes." The hounds were the Queen's men—constables, bailiffs, soldiers, and the like—while the foxes were named for John Foxe, the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Church Militant was nominally responsible to him, but their immediate commander was John Field, a firebrand who saw sorcery everywhere, and would doubtless have made a fine witch-finder in Scotland or Lorraine. Although the Church Militant did not have a parliamentary license, as yet, to burn witches, let alone Catholics, there were doubtless many among them who were hoping devoutly that the day would come. The ragged little man might, if he were a Dominican friar, be a heresy-hunter himself—but this was Queen Jane's England, and circumstance had reduced Dominicans, Franciscans, Carthusians, and Benedictines alike to the status of mere beggars, dependent on the charity of the Catholic laity.

When his deliberate pause had drawn on long enough, Kelley added: "I swear before God, Father, that I am innocent of any crime against Christ. I dare say that the Royal College of Physicians might have objections to my beliefs, but I was properly prenticed as an apothecary once, and am no charlatan."

"Are you a cunning man?" the friar asked.

*Cunning enough, I hope*, Kelley thought—but what he was being asked was whether he used herbs as curative agents. "No," he said. "A Paracelsian—in English terms, a follower of Tom Muffet." It was true, in a way; such potions as he had sold as a sideline to his fortune-telling had been chemical rather than herbal, for he thought himself a thoroughly modern man, and bore a grudge against the Royal College.

"Muffet left these shores many years ago," the little man murmured. "According to Francis Drake, he's on the far side of the world."

"Aye," said Kelley, "so he is, if Drake can be believed. I believe that the

captain really did sail around the world, mind, even though the other rumors credited to his testimony are hard to believe." *Except for a man who talks to angels*, he carefully did not add. Rumor of the wild tales that Drake was telling in London had reached as far as the Welsh borders, and Kelley had taken more account of them than their incredulous tellers, for the angels told similar stories, to the extent that he could understand their jabbering.

This time, the monk actually went so far as to nod his head sagely. Educated Romanists knew perfectly well that the world was a sphere. Those Englishmen who clung to stubborn faith in its flatness were far more likely to rally to the Puritan cause; the Church Militant was full of them. "My name is Cuthbert," the little man finally conceded.

"Named for Cuthbert Tunstall, I don't doubt," Kelley was quick to say. "A great Englishman. What's your order?"

"I'm a member of the Order of St. Dominic," Brother Cuthbert told him. "I'm an Englishman born, but I've spent more than half my life in France."

"And wish you were there still, I'll wager," Kelley said.

"That's not for me to choose," the friar said, only a trifle sadly.

"I know something of duty myself," Kelley muttered, wishing that he were insincere. "I have no clerical vocation, but the Lord expects obedience from us all, even when His instructions are difficult." This affirmation did not awaken any suspicion in Brother Cuthbert, who presumably took it to mean that Kelley was steadfast in his Catholic faith, in spite of the pressures to which that faith was now subject in England.

The friar looked around again, but no one was looking in his direction; indeed, the party of four gentlemen and the makeshift party of three might have been engaged in a tacit competition to see which could ignore him more ostentatiously. Kelley knew as well as Brother Cuthbert that ears might still be pricked to hear their conversation, but the other two groups seemed busy enough with raucous entertainment. They were obviously drinking stronger ale than Kelley was.

"If you were London-bound," Kelley said, softly, "I'd deem it an honor to keep you company. The roads are unsafe, they say, for men traveling alone. I have no weapon, but I've strong arms and legs." That was true enough; he was thin but well-muscled, and he towered over the Dominican by at least three fingers and a thumb.

The friar had to suspect that his companion was as keen to benefit from protection as to offer it, but the fact remained that he had been forced to shelter in an inn for want of a safe-house, and might indeed benefit from a temporary alliance—perhaps sufficiently to return the favor the following night, when he ought to be better able to find shelter with men of his own faith.

The little man finally nodded his head, tacitly consenting to that whole range of possibility—always provided, of course, that Kelley could fake a plausible confession while they made their way eastward on the following morn. Kelley felt sure that he could; he had sins enough to his name, without ever having to mention fortune-telling or skrying-stones, let alone imperious angels.

Kelley raised his tankard in a gesture of thanks before he quaffed the

dregs—and when the time came for the lamp to be put out and for the five men lying on the straw to take their places, Kelley and the monk lay down side-by-side, on the opposite side of the fireplace to the other three circumstantial companions.

## 2

The Black Bear's door had been securely barred and bolted for an hour and more when someone began to hammer on it. Kelley, who woke immediately from a painful nightmare and sat up straight, though it made his head reel, knew immediately that it was the hilt of a dagger or a staff, not a fist, that was thumping the door, and his heart sank even before he heard the fateful words: "Open in the name of the Church Militant!"

The innkeeper emerged from the back room in a night-shirt, carrying a candle-tray, but would not open up without first looking through the spy-hole in the door and demanding to know who was knocking and why. When he heard the words "Church Militant" repeated, the landlord scowled, but hastened to obey. Kelley looked wildly about, while his head seemed to swell like a billow of dark smoke, but he knew already that there was no viable escape route. Brother Cuthbert had woken too, but he was befuddled in a perfectly ordinary fashion, and did not seem to have yet taken in the import of the ominous words.

Kelley moved away from the friar, motivated by altruism rather than fear, because he was quite certain that Field's men were after him, not some Dominican stray. It did no good, though; when the Churchmen came in the three travelers who had been sleeping on the far side of the hearth were quick to establish their own separateness by declaring that Kelley and the Dominican were obvious Romanists, probable conspirators and definitely traveling-companions. The three had, of course, jumped to the conclusion that the friar was the wanted man, and fancied that Kelley might be an agent of the rumored "underground" that protected Romanists, sent to meet him here. Any faint hope that remained to Kelley that the Dominican might be the foxes' target vanished, however, as soon as he and the Puritans' leader locked gazes.

"Edward Kelley," said the Churchman, "we have a warrant for your arrest, issued by the Bishop of Oxford, on the charge of sorcery." The black-clad man still had the staff in his hand that he had used to hammer in the door, and his three companions had cudgels as well as sheathed poniards; there was no possibility that Kelley might be able to skittle them and take to his heels.

"My name is Talbot," Kelley said, his eyes flickering sideways as one of the men-at-arms knelt down to search his satchel. "You have the wrong man. There's doubtless more than one without ears on the London Road."

The satchel was so nearly empty that the search took no more than ten seconds. When the searcher shook his head, the leader of the party scowled, but made no comment. They had obviously been told to look for the stone, but they probably had no idea of its significance; in all likelihood, they sim-

ply expected it to provide evidence that he was some sort of magician. They could have no idea of the sort of magician he actually was—unsurprisingly, given that he had no understanding of it himself. They were not in the least impressed by his protestation that his name was Talbot.

“Bring them both,” said the man with the staff, curtly.

“This man has nothing to do with me,” Kelley was quick to say, in response to a pang of conscience. “We met by chance this evening; I’ve never seen him before. He has done no wrong and you have no warrant to take him.”

The man who had searched Kelley’s bag reached out a long arm and snatched away the hat that the little man had replaced on his head before getting to his feet, exposing his tonsure. That was no proof of anything, but it was enough for the foxes.

“If he has nothing to hide, he has nothing to fear,” the Puritan leader said, portentously, “but a man who keeps company with sorcerers must expect to be questioned.”

“Where are you taking us?” Brother Cuthbert asked, with surprising mildness. Kelley was impressed by the fact that the friar made no attempt to deny knowing him, in spite of the charge that had been laid against him; he presumed that his boastful claim of being a follower of Paracelsus had made a greater impact than he had hoped or supposed, in spite of his worn clothing and the evidence of his past crimes.

“To the lock-up in Hungerford, for now,” the fox replied. “We’ll await instructions as to whether you’re to be sent to Oxford or London.”

That was not entirely unwelcome news, Kelley thought. They would not be put to the question in Hungerford, and if the Church commanded that they be sent to London for interrogation, his boots would be spared fifty miles of hard wear. He would doubtless be chafed by irons, by way of compensation, but he had slipped his slim wrists out of manacles before, and an opportunity to escape might arise somehow, given that he had angels on his side. He could not help worrying, though, that the angels might deem him expendable now, if Ann could get the stone to John Dee without him. No one else he had invited to look into the false darkness had so far been able to see the angels, but Dee was universally reputed to be a great man, as much magician as mathematician and astronomer. If any man in England could see angels, he was surely the one—why else, after all, would the angels have commanded him so urgently to take the stone to Dee?

*I was always too stupid to understand what they tried to tell me,* Kelley reflected, bitterly. *Perhaps they sent me to Dee in despair, and will leave me to the tender mercies of Foxe and Field because I have failed them.*

The foxes had a farmer’s cart waiting outside, lit by a brace of oil-lamps set either side of the driver’s bench. There was a single set of leg-irons freshly stapled to the backboard behind the bench, which were fitted to Kelley’s ankles. They left the Dominican unshackled, but he was obviously unenthusiastic about his chances of outrunning his captors. The four Churchmen stationed themselves at the corners of the cart, holding themselves stiffly attentive even though they were sitting down,

“I’m truly sorry,” Kelley murmured to his fellow captive, as soon as they were under way. “I had no right to involve you in this. I should have kept to myself as I ate my supper.”

"They'd have spotted me anyway, and brought me along," the friar replied, generously. "As the man says, I have nothing to fear, having nothing to hide." He could not add any manifest confidence to the second statement.

"The warrant lies," Kelley told him, feeling it incumbent on him to insist. "I am Edward Kelley, I admit, and a sinner, to be sure, but if I've encountered magic, I'm its victim, not its master."

"I believe you," the Dominican replied, with a slight shrug of his shoulders. "I only know Field by repute, but he's said to be very reckless in his accusations." John Field was a man that everyone now knew by repute, as one who was either inspired or insane. Unfortunately, even if the latter were the case, his was a kind of insanity that made some appeal to common men who were frightened by the pace at which the world was changing, and intimidated by the recent accumulation of philosophical ideas beyond their comprehension. Field might have been harmless had he not secured the trust of John Foxe, but the Archbishop's confidence was now worth almost as much as that of the Dukes of Northumberland and Suffolk, who were the Queen's strong arms.

"I've never offended Field," Kelley said, sourly, "and he has no reason to pursue me." It was a lie, though. Although much of what the angels said to him was murky in its meaning, it contained echoes of Field's Satanic madness as well as Francis Drake's gaudy boasts. Whatever whisper had reached Field's ears regarding the black stone, and what Kelley had seen within it, had been bound to catch his attention.

*If only, Kelley thought, I had had the sense to keep quiet when the miracle first enfolded me in its untender grip—but what man could help his tongue flapping in such circumstances?* At the very least, he could not have kept it secret from Ann, and who could prevent a woman from gossiping?

"If I had only managed to reach Mortlake. . . ." Kelley murmured, dispiritedly—although in truth, he could not be certain that he would have found a warm welcome there. He had never met John Dee, and had no reason to think that the angels might have prepared the way for him. Nor had he had any real reason to think that Dee could have protected him against John Field, had he so desired. Dee was a Protestant, but certainly not a Puritan. He was reputed to have influence with the militant lords who commanded armies in Ireland, the Netherlands, and elsewhere, and even greater influence with the Admiralty and the Muscovy Company, but that did not mean that he was capable of standing off a challenge from the Church Militant.

The journey to Hungerford was not a long one, and the two captives were thrust into the lock-up without any further ceremony, while their captors presumably hurried to their beds. There were two prisoners already caged, waiting for the next assizes, but the circuit-judge had not long passed that way, so they were still relatively plump and not yet seriously diseased. They only woke up long enough to examine the newcomers, judge them relatively harmless, and then lie down again.

Kelley sat down with his back against the bars of the grille, knowing that he would not be able to sleep. His head was such a riot of confusion that he almost yearned for a simple focused pain. He did not even have a name to put to his state of mind, and took leave to wonder whether men

might not have mistaken the nature of Hell, for lack of insight into the true range of supernatural torments.

"Would you like me to hear your confession now?" Brother Cuthbert asked, unenthusiastically.

"Best not," Kelley told him. "If they think I might have told you something they'd like to know, they might not be as respectful of the sanctity of the confessional as they ought to be." He spoke loud enough to be clearly heard by the eavesdropper his captors had posted. For good measure, he added: "You were unlucky to meet me, Brother, and should be glad that I tried to take you for a fool, telling you nothing but lies."

There was no lantern in the jail, so he could not see the Dominican's response to that; he hoped, though, that Brother Cuthbert would not take it amiss, whatever conclusion the friar reached as to the statement's implications.

Having no idea how long he had slept before the Churchmen hammered on the inn door, Kelley had no way of knowing how long he would have to wait until daylight, nor how much longer he might have to wait after that to be put back in the cart, but he felt that he might as well make use of the time by praying. He had not been much given to prayer for the greater part of his life, but now that he had become the emissary of angels he had repented somewhat of his earlier laxity.

*I know that there is war in Heaven once again, Lord, he said, silently, and I know that you might not be able to help me even though you so desire—but if, perchance, it is necessary that I deliver myself as well as the black stone and the red powder into John Dee's hands, I cannot do so now without material assistance. Even if my wife can get the stone safely to Mortlake, it might be no use to him without my gift. So please, if you can hear my thoughts and my supplications, spare me another miracle, to give me a chance to escape while the cart is on the road tomorrow. If it heads eastward, by all means postpone the propitious moment until we reach Staines or Twickenham, but if we head northward to Oxford, I'd be glad of the earliest opportunity. And please take care of Brother Cuthbert, if you can, for Field will certainly take it out on him if I escape and he cannot.*

Brother Cuthbert seemed to be praying too; Kelley could hear the faint clicking of a rosary.

Kelley could not help remembering, after his prayer, how much happier he had been as a faker, before his impostures turned real. He still could not be absolutely certain that he had not simply fallen prey to his own deceptively persuasive talents, as many a false magician was reputed to do, but he knew that he no longer had a choice of destinies. Whether the voice that spoke to him through the black stone truly emanated from the ether, or merely from his own disturbed mind, he was bound to follow its instructions. Nor could he really be certain, taking everything into consideration, that the angel whose bidding he did was loyal to God—all the more so in the light of the angel's own insistence that the present war was no Satanic revolt, and that the Devil was not involved in it at all—but that too made no practical difference. The fact was that he could not disobey the instruction he had been given, even though it seemed at present that he would not be able to carry it out.

"Are you ill, my son?" Brother Cuthbert asked, perhaps sensing that he was shivering more than was warranted by the cold.

"Is it possible, Brother Cuthbert," he whispered, "that the wars of religion here on Earth are mirrored in Heaven? Given that Romanists and Protestants both claim loyalty to God, but are prepared to fight one another to the death, is it conceivable that Heaven itself might be riven by a great schism? Why should the angels not be just as uncertain of the proper way to worship God as men are? And why, given that uncertainty, should they not fall to violence to settle the issue, hurling the serried ranks of their chariots of fire into battles as fierce as any now being fought in the Netherlands or Germany?"

"Surely not," said the friar. "Men are stupid and ignorant, but the angels are the Lord's messengers, and know his will. There can be no dissent in their ranks—unless, perhaps, another prideful Lucifer appears among them, to begin a new revolt. . . ." The friar trailed off, made pensive by the strange idea—or perhaps interrupted by the sudden awareness that something was happening.

Kelley immediately leapt to the conclusion that his prayer had been answered. He would have been quite content to hear the padlock securing the grille click open, and the iron bolts slide discreetly back, but it seemed that the angels were not as subtle as that, or that the Lord preferred to move in a more adventurous way. *Perhaps, he thought, the angels, like the fairies of legend, are intimidated by cold iron.* At any rate, it was the stone wall of the jail that was in the process of giving way, audibly. It did not implode, as if breached by a cannonball or smashed by some cunning silent petard, but it crumbled, rustling and crackling as it did so, like sand tumbling down a slope. Kelley could not see the stones coming apart, but he could see the gap that appeared where they fell away. Cloudy as the night was, it was visibly brighter than the awful gloom of the prison. The draught that came in through the widening gap was clean and cool.

The fragments of the dissolving wall scattered over the floor, reaching the place where the two sleepers were, but none, it seemed, was large enough to hurt them. They both woke up, and scrambled clear instinctively.

The wan light that was filtering through the new-made gap was briefly interrupted by a shadow as someone—or something—passed through. Kelley could not see the owner of the hand that grabbed his wrist in the obscurity of the jail, but he judged from the unerring and exceedingly insistent manner in which his wrist was seized that the other must be able to see in the dark. He took that for another evidence of angelic involvement, and leapt willingly enough to the conclusion that the guide sent to free him was a supernatural emissary, perhaps gifted with superhuman strength as well as a talent for dissolving stone walls.

The most assiduous of the various angels that had spoken to him through the medium of the philosopher's stone had told him that angels had no eyes at all, nor hands either, and had considerable difficulty interacting with vulgar matter in the slightest degree, but there was nothing delicate about the way Kelley was hauled to his feet and yanked toward the freshly made gap in the lock-up's wall. He hardly had time to fumble

for Brother Cuthbert's wrist in his turn—but he had the soft sound of the rosary to guide him, and made no mistake.

The Dominican did not seem entirely enthusiastic to be seized and saved, but he consented in the end to be led away. Kelley suspected that the little man must be entertaining visions of the *danse macabre*, fearing that it was hooded Death that was leading him away in train—partly because he could not suppress the image himself—so he was quick to whisper reassurances to his new friend.

"Have no fear," he said. "This is the work of seraphim, not demons. We shall be safe enough soon."

That was easy enough to say, but Kelley found it difficult enough to maintain his own faith once the three of them had squeezed through the hole in the brickwork and were hurried away into the darkness. He was as sure as he could be that the owner of the iron grip was vaguely human in form, because he could hear the muffled sounds of feet striding at a carefully measured pace, and could sense the movements of a human torso and head, but he could not see anything at all, and he knew that it was not impossible that the person dragging him away might have horns on his head and a demon's monstrous features.

At any rate, their rescuer seemed as strong as any ordinary man, although Kelley eventually concluded, with only a slight pang of disappointment, that he was probably not significantly stronger than that. He never set a foot wrong, though, whether he was pacing along the muddy road or making his way across fields whose crops were beginning to shoot up in earnest. He never broke into a run, although he seemed to be moving with greater purpose, as well as greater precision, than any marching soldier that Kelley had seen.

Although they never moved so fast as to exhaust his legs, Kelley was proud that he only stumbled twice and never fell at all—a better record by far than poor Cuthbert, who had to be dragged back to his feet half a dozen times, and must have bloodied his knees horribly. The leader of the forced march slowed his pace at each catastrophe, but never actually stopped, so there was no rest for his followers, even when the little monk's plaintive voice became so hoarse and agonized that Kelley feared for his life.

There was a terrible moment when Kelley feared that they might be expected and forced to walk all the way to Mortlake in that fearful mechanical fashion—but then dawn broke ahead of them in the east, and the little procession came abruptly to a halt.

"I need to leave you now," their rescuer said to them, in a strangely accented voice. "Make your way to John Dee as fast as you can. Should you get into trouble again, I'll try to help, but can make no promises." He was still a mere silhouette, devoid of features, but Kelley was sure by then that he had no horns.

By the time it was light enough to see clearly, the mysterious personage had been completely swallowed up by the retreating shadows—but there was no mistaking the dark mistrust on the Dominican's face.

"Given that you're charged with sorcery, if only by that maniac Field," Cuthbert opined, when he had got his breath back, "I think I'd rather not

have discovered that your friend and rescuer felt obliged to disappear at cock-crow."

Kelley felt free to smile. His head felt clearer now, perhaps because he had been touched by supernatural power once again, or perhaps because elation had crowded out confusion for a while. "There's no turning back now, Brother Cuthbert," he said. "They might have believed you before when you told them you didn't know me, but now that we've fled together, our fates are linked. You may go your own way if you know a safe place, or come with me, but in either case, they'll be after you as keenly as they're after me."

### 3

Dragging Brother Cuthbert behind him turned out to have been a good decision. As Kelley had anticipated when he first set eyes on the hem of the little man's habit, the Dominican knew where friends were to be found en route to London. They ate well the day after their release, and caught up on their lost sleep in a comfortable bed after nightfall, in a manor house by the river at Twickenham.

The manor was the most palatial edifice in which Kelley had ever been received as a guest; although the bed in which he slept was in the servants' quarters and he ate his meal at the kitchen table, it was still an unexpected luxury, only slightly diminished by the fact that the staff had been reduced to a bare skeleton and there seemed to be no one in residence in the masters' quarters. The housekeeper who received them did not offer them a tour of the house, but did take them back and forth through the vast dining hall whose walls were hung with tapestries that were only slightly moth-eaten and portraits whose colors had not entirely faded to brown, and which was equipped with a minstrels' gallery. The housekeeper even offered to spare a groom from the stables to row them down the river to Mortlake, when Cuthbert told him that was their next intended stopping-point, but he accepted Kelley's polite refusal without the slightest protest.

"We're wanted men," Kelley reminded the friar, when they were on the road again. "It was bad enough that I inveigled you into sharing my risk—I don't want to imperil your entire underground network."

Brother Cuthbert, who must have begun to suspect that Kelley was not a Catholic at all, looked at him rather strangely, but accepted what he said meekly enough.

"In any case," Kelley said, "you might, after all, do better to go your own way once we reach Mortlake. I really do not know what kind of welcome I ought to expect from John Dee, even if my wife has contrived to get there ahead of me and shown him the stone."

"What stone?" Brother Cuthbert asked, having not yet been let into Kelley's secret.

"A skrying-stone, which I was instructed to deliver into his care," Kelley admitted, figuring that it was safe enough to do so.

"You're a Paracelsian in more way than one, then," the friar observed, showing no particular surprise. The great physician's reputation as a diviner was almost as great as his reputation as a healer. It even extended as far as rumor that he had had intercourse with angels.

"Aye," said Kelley, readily enough. "I'm a magician, of sorts—but I told the truth when I said that I was more victim than master. Such truth as can be obtained by skrying seems to be far less comprehensible than one might hope or expect, and it's not without penalty. I'm no sorcerer, that's for sure—I wish no ill to any man, and I do the bidding of angels, rather than having imps at my beck and call."

Yet again, the little man showed no obvious disapproval, nor any particular surprise. He had, after all, seen the wall of Hungerford jail dissolve, and had been led away therefrom by something that was surely not *quite* human. Some Dominicans might have reacted to that uncanny experience with horror, but Brother Cuthbert seemed more calmly scholarly in his attitude.

"Perhaps I should go my own way, once you're safe," the friar said, "But I should like to meet Master Dee, if he is indeed prepared to make you welcome. He's said to be the most knowledgeable man in the realm, in spite of over-reaching his ambition when he tried to breach the bounds of Heaven."

Kelley was tempted to tell the little man that Dee's ill-fated ether-ship might have stirred the blissful waters of Paradise far more profoundly than most men presently imagined, but thought it better to maintain a measure of discretion. They walked on in silence for a while, basking in the nascent warmth of spring.

The afternoon was well advanced by the time they reached Mortlake, but there were still more than two hours in hand of sunset. They obtained directions to John Dee's house without difficulty, and without attracting any apparent suspicion. Once he was in sight of the house, however, Kelley's firm tread faltered, and he paused uncertainly on the other side of the street, facing the building's main door. The river was behind the house, the towpath separated from its rear by a strip of land that accommodated a few fishermen's huts, and was partly divided up into kitchen-gardens.

Kelley made a show of looking carefully around, as if to excuse his hesitation. There was no evidence, so far as he could see, that the house was under surveillance by John Field's spies. He was still summoning up the courage to cross the street and knock on the front door when the door opened of its own accord. Two men stepped out. One appeared to be younger than Kelley by seven years or so—not long out of his twenties, if at all—while the other, who was a vigorous man in the prime of life, wore a tonsure that he was not making the slightest effort to conceal. Neither, obviously, could be John Dee, who was neither a youth nor a monk—but the monk appeared to be playing the part of a host in bidding a polite farewell to the other, who must have been visiting the house as a guest.

"Who can that be?" asked Brother Cuthbert, presumably referring to the Romanist rather than the stripling.

"I don't know," Kelley said. Before he could say anything more, the little man removed his hat and took a step forward into the roadway, turning

slightly to one side and lowering his head, so that his fellow Romanist was able to see the back of it.

The younger man had already turned his back to march away in the direction of London, but the monk who had seen him off had paused to look carefully around, and he caught sight of Brother Cuthbert almost immediately. The first expression to cross his face was one of suspicion, but Cuthbert made some sort of signal with his hand, which the other obviously recognized.

After prolonging his pause for a long moment of consideration, the man who wore his tonsure openly moved swiftly across the road, dodging around a cart full of spring turnips on its way to market. "Are you looking for me, Brother?" he asked. His English was heavily accented.

"My name is Cuthbert," the little man said. "Order of St. Dominic, late of the second house in Paris."

The foreigner's face cleared somewhat, although vestiges of suspicion lingered. "I'm Giordano Bruno, of the same Order," he replied. "I was in Paris myself until a week ago, although I'm an Italian by birth. Do you have a message for me?"

"No, Brother," Cuthbert said. "We're here in search of Dr. Dee. This is my friend Edward . . . Talbot."

"Actually," Kelley said, "it's Edward Kelley. Is my wife here?"

Bruno's face underwent another abrupt transformation. "Kelley!" he said. "Your wife arrived early this morning, with a strange black stone, a packet of powder, and an exceedingly strange story. Master Dee was disturbed by the notion that John Field's men are after you, but he took your wife in regardless—we've been expecting you."

"We'd best get off the street, then," Kelley said. "The Church Militant will be abuzz with annoyance, since we were broken out of Hungerford jail."

The Italian did not know quite what to make of that news, but he said: "There were militiamen hereabouts yesterday, but we haven't seen one today." He turned to cross the street again, but they had to pause to let a cart through, so he continued. "Rumor along the river says that something's brewing on the far side of the city—but Master Dee tells me that London has been a powder-keg for months, and that I've only jumped from an Aristotelian frying-pan to a Puritan fire in coming here. Fortunately, I'm heading westward tomorrow, with a safe destination in view."

They had reached Dee's door by now, and Bruno was already opening it. Brother Cuthbert seemed interested by the last remark, and would surely have asked where the Italian had in mind, but another figure appeared in the open doorway before they could cross the threshold, immediately commanding all attention.

John Dee was older than Brother Cuthbert and taller than Kelley; he wore a long, flowing beard, whose grayness only made it seem more imposing. He was simply dressed, though, with a plain bonnet on his head and a rope girdle round his waist that might have suited a monastic robe better than the elongated jerkin that it was actually securing.

"Kelley," said Bruno, briefly, "and a brother Dominican."

Dee frowned briefly at Brother Cuthbert, but stood aside swiftly enough to let both his new guests come in. When the door had closed

again, leaving the corridor within somewhat ill-lit, he bowed, a trifle stiffly. "I'm glad you had the sense to wait for young Bacon to go before you approached," he said. "He's a true scholar, and wouldn't dream of betraying Bruno, but his coterie is under increasing pressure from Foxe's schoolmen. Bacon's mentor might not balk at a chance to send the Church Militant to my door, for the sake of scholarly rivalry."

"Is my wife here?" Kelley asked abruptly.

"Yes, she is," Dee replied. "And your so-called skrying-stone too, although I've peered into it with all the concentration I can muster and can't see a thing. Bruno tried too, and insists that it's naught but a block of polished obsidian."

Kelley did not know whether that was good news or bad. The distressing dizziness in his brain was accumulating again, although he had hoped that it might diminish once he was in the same house as the stone again. It seemed that he still had no one with whom to share the most intimate feature of his curse—but at least he had access now to a scholar who might be able to interpret what the angels said to him more fully and more accurately.

"Obsidian it may be, Doctor," Kelley said, "but there's magic in it, or I'm a madman fit for Bedlam. You may disregard the messages the angels wanted me to bring you, if you so wish, but I'm ready to convey them and I'm certain that they'll give me no rest until I do."

Dee ushered all three of them through a slightly cramped corridor and brought them into a large, high-ceilinged room that was obviously his library and workroom. While Kelley caught his breath at the remarkable sight, Dee put his head around the door again to call for a servant. When the servant appeared, very promptly, the mathematician instructed him to fetch Mistress Kelley. In the meantime, Kelley gawped at the shelves as if thunderstruck.

Dee's library was reputed to be the biggest in England, and Kelley could not doubt that the reputation was justified; he estimated that there must be at least a thousand printed books here, as well as mountainous piles of manuscripts, as many bound as unbound. The scholar's broad oak table was impressive too, strewn as it was with numerous loose manuscripts, some of them apparently still in the making, although the actual writing-desk was a portable board mounted on two triangular supports, which could be propped up anywhere or balanced on the arms of a chair.

Was it possible, Kelley wondered, that the world boasted so much discovered wisdom? Was it even possible that there was information enough in the world to be so discovered and contained? No man, he felt certain, could ever read so many words in a lifetime—even a lifetime as extended as John Dee's.

"We have room enough to accommodate you both tonight, I think," Dee said to Brother Cuthbert, "provided that Master Bruno does not mind sharing his room."

Cuthbert made no objection to that; curiosity, it seemed, had got the better of him, and he wanted nothing more than to stay here for a while. Kelley could not blame him, and was glad of it—the last thing he wanted was for Cuthbert to fall into the hands of the foxes while wandering along the Thames.

"I should warn you," Kelley said to his host, dutifully, "that there's a warrant out for my arrest, and I escaped from prison last night. Cuthbert is a fugitive too, alas. If you want me to go, I will. I'd be happy to meet you at some safe rendezvous, in order to look into the stone and relay what the angels want me to say to you there."

Dee frowned again, evidently somewhat dubious about the angels that had Kelley in thrall, and whatever message it was they were determined to send him. "I know no safer place than here," he said. "Certainly not in London, where there seems to be trouble brewing—although trouble always seems to be simmering there. The river's full of talk of Francis Drake's boasts and misdemeanors, but that's often the case, even when he's in the Americas. This time, alas, he's come home to an England far less safe than the one he left."

"The angels have made mention of Drake too," Kelley said, warily. "If there were any chance of inviting him to the parley. . . ."

"Sir Francis and I have not spoken for some time," Dee told him, stiffly. "He bears a grudge against me, although I have none against him. Your angels have mentioned his name as well as mine, you say? Have they also mentioned Tom Digges and John Field?" Kelley knew that Digges and Field had both been aboard Dee's ether-ship, along with Drake, Walter Raleigh, and Edward de Vere.

"Aye sir, they have," Kelley said—but he had no time to say anything further before Ann came hurrying through the library door. Because she was in a gentleman's house, and had obviously been politely welcomed, she curtsied awkwardly rather than throwing herself gaily into his arms, but he seized her anyway and hugged her with all the force of his delight in seeing her again, safe and sound.

"Thank God you came safely through," he said. "I knew you'd be safer on the barge than I was on the road, but . . ."

"The stone and the powder are safe," she told him, although it was not the matter uppermost in his mind. "Shall I fetch them?"

"Not yet," said John Dee. "First, I think your husband is in need of food and ale, and time to rest. He may renew his intercourse with the angelic realm this evening, after supper."

Ann was still staring into her husband's eyes, gleeful to find him well. "I've half-persuaded the Master that the stone is real," she said, proudly, "Even though he and Master Bruno could see no more in it than I can myself. When I told him a little of what the angels had said to you, he understood."

"I would not go so far as to say that I understood," Dee said, dubiously, "but I admit to curiosity. There may be no cause for surprise in the fact that what you say echoes Drake's wild fancies, but . . . well, I'll hear you out, Master Kelley. I've nothing to lose by that. Mistress Kelley, would you take Brother Cuthbert to the kitchen, please, and ask Jane to give him a bite to eat? I'll bring your husband myself in a few minutes."

Brother Cuthbert was obviously reluctant to be sent away, but he dared not take offense. Bruno went with him. Kelley sat down in an armchair in response to Dee's gestured invitation, glad of the support. His head still felt impossibly large and light, but his train of thought seemed clear enough.

"How well do you know Sir Francis Drake?" Dee asked, when the door had closed behind the three.

"I've never met him, Master," Kelley said. "The angels seem to be familiar with his exploits, though—especially the one that bade me call him Aristocles. The names the angels use among themselves cannot be couched in human syllables, of course. Some of their voices I can only hear as a foreign tongue I call Enochian, and even though I can translate what Aristocles says into English, it is somewhat broken. If only he could speak directly to a scholar like you, you might be able to hear him more clearly, or translate his sendings more eloquently."

"I've heard the name Aristocles before," Dee admitted, although his brow was darkly clouded with puzzlement. "How is it that you can see things in your skrying-stone that other men cannot? If ether-dwellers can use such a means of transmission at all, why should they not be audible to anyone? And if the ether-dwellers have a message for me, why could they not find a way of transmitting it to me directly?"

"I don't know, Master," Kelley said. "It was likely a matter of chance that I was the one who found the stone and the powder on Northwick Hill, in what I took for the broken shell of a fallen star. Perhaps any man who picked it up might have become their emissary, urged to bring the objects to you—although none but a fortune-teller would likely have been struck by the notion that the stone might make a skrying-glass. I know that my past as a trickster does not engender confidence in what I say, but the last thing I need is to be arrested and questioned by the Church Militant, so you may be confident that I'm telling the truth. I don't know why the foxes are intent on harassing me, although I understand that John Field was aboard your ether-ship, and experienced a vision of Hell in consequence."

"He was aboard the ship," Dee admitted, "but his nightmares were his own—Tom Digges had a better dream by far, and so did Drake, although Drake still will not admit that his was a dream induced by the narcotizing effect of breathing ether. At any rate, Field will be unready to believe that your mysterious apparitions are angels rather than demons."

"I'm a literate man, Doctor," Kelley said, "and I'm not stupid. I can't explain how I have the gift of seeing into the stone's darkness when others cannot, but I do have it—and, thus far, I know of no one else who has. The voices are real, and I believe them when they say that they emanate from the realm between the stars: the realm of the angels. I'm a Copernican, as you are; I've tried to read the *Description of the Celestial Orbs* that Tom Digges published, following his father's discoveries; although much of it was beyond my understanding, I understand that the Earth turns on its axis, so that the sun only appears to move around it, and that all the planets orbit the sun. I know that the sun is but one star in a vast host, whose members are very far apart, and—thanks to the stone—I know that the spaces between them are not empty; in the same fashion that God has wasted no worlds, so he has not wasted the spaces in between. The quintessential realm is populated by angels, who need not assume material presence of our sort at all—and, when they do, are hardly more than vaporous shadows—but who have form and structure of their own, in another kind of matter. I have been given a simple proof of the truth of what

I say to present to you, Master, although it will require some hours even for a mathematician of your prodigious imagination to assess its merit."

Dee seemed startled by all of this, perhaps more so by the fine speech than the offer of proof. "What proof?" he demanded, gruffly.

"I understand, Doctor," Kelley continued, growing in confidence, although his head felt lighter still as he let the ideas fill it, "that you and Leonard Digges were frustrated in your hope that the Copernican system would provide a perfect mathematical account of the movement of the planets about the sun, without any need for Ptolemaic epicycles. I am instructed to tell you that the flaw rests in your assumption that the planetary orbits are circular. In fact, they are elliptical. If you take that into account, you will be able to explain away the seeming anomalies in the orbits, see the elegance of the system, and deduce the mathematical law of affinity."

Dee was manifestly shocked now—again, Kelley thought, not so much by the actual content of what he had been told as by the fact that a man of his sort should say such things at all. "You're right in your judgment, Doctor," Kelley admitted. "I'm not much of a philosopher, and don't know the full significance of what I've just said—but I have it on the authority of an angel that you will."

Dee was still nonplussed, but made haste to collect himself. "Giordano is a firm believer in the Copernican system and the principle of plenitude," he murmured. "He left Paris because the Aristotelians who had harried him out of Italy made life equally uncomfortable for him there—but he has never extended the principle of plenitude so far as to argue that the spaces between the worlds must be as full of life as the worlds themselves. He has atomist leanings, and has assumed in the past that worlds are the proper objects of Creation, and that what lies between them is a void. Given that the crew of my ether-ship proved that the ether is breathable, however, albeit disturbing, then space *must* be a plenum rather than a void, and the principle of plenitude would then suggest . . . I cannot see, though—even if the principle were admissible—how any inhabitants of those spaces might be made of *another kind of matter*."

"According to my understanding of the angel Aristocles," Kelley told him, now feeling almost intoxicated by the tide of odd cognition, "the matter we can see and touch is but the tenth part of all the matter in the universe, the rest being hidden from our eyes, even with the aid of telescopes."

"What do you know about telescopes?" Dee was quick to say.

"*That* cat's long out of the bag, Master," Kelley said. "There's hardly anyone in England who does not know that you and Digges equipped the navy and the Muscovy Company with such devices in secret, to give them an advantage over the Spaniards and the Portuguese. The secrets of navigation contained in your forbidden books are likely a lot safer, because common men could not make head nor tail of them, but there's not a glassmaker in the realm who isn't playing games with combinations of magnifying lenses. We all put our fingers to our lips when we speak of it, especially in the company of foreigners, but everyone knows that the Spaniards now have such devices too."

Dee frowned, but shrugged his shoulders, admitting that his protest had been a mere token of pretense. "You're right," he said. Then he made a

visible effort to collected himself. "It will take me hours to manipulate the numbers," he continued, "but if your proof is sound . . . Tom Digges wrote me a letter only last month regarding the mathematics of the parabola, determined by his experiments in ballistics; he suggested that there might be parabolas elsewhere in nature, but ellipses are another matter . . . if you're right, it might demonstrate that your ether-dwellers possess exotic knowledge. Have you any other to offer, before I set to work?"

"No, sir," Kelley said, warily, "but I've been promised more. You'll be in a better position after this evening's séance to assess what you might yet be able to learn—and to judge who else ought to be let in on the secret."

"If what you mean by *the secret* is that there's a new war supposedly raging in Heaven," Dee said, "that cat's out of the bag, too—your wife told me."

"No, Master," Kelley said. "The secret's far more elaborate than that. Did she also tell you that England is threatened by invasion?"

Dee only shook his head at that, refusing to be surprised. "No," he said, "but I've heard that Drake is convinced that an invasion has already taken place on the far side of the world. Have your angels told you about a world inside the moon? Have they mentioned *Great Fleshcores*?"

Kelley could see now that John Dee was fighting hard to suppress anxieties of his own, and was genuinely uncertain as to what to believe. If the mathematician's assumption that the planetary orbits were circular really were to be proven false by a few hours' calculations, he would surely be persuaded that Kelley's stone and powder did have magic in them.

"According to the angels, Master," Kelley said, softly, "it was a miracle that all five of your crewmen survived their fall to Earth—but it was divine justice too. Had the ether-ship not been sabotaged, it would have been more probable, not less, that the five men inside it would have perished."

"I had thought until a little while ago that only three survived," Dee said, quietly. "But if Drake can be trusted, Raleigh is in the Pacific islands, and if the rumors that float upriver are true, de Vere is in London again, although he rarely goes abroad for fear of being recognized . . . but there'll be time to discuss the matter further tonight. You must be hungry and weary, Master Kelley. Come into the kitchen now."

"Brother Cuthbert found me a bed last night, and a good meal," Kelley told him, as they went back into the corridor. "I must admit, though, that I'm glad to find a Dominican already in residence here. I'd have worried, otherwise, about the risk of bringing a Catholic into your home."

Dee did not get a chance to reply. The people gathered at the kitchen table—who included a woman Kelley assumed to be Dee's wife, as well as his own wife and the two Dominicans—had obviously become impatient waiting for them.

"In the Vatican, Master Kelley," Giordano Bruno said, "the cardinals are obliged to play the game of Devil's Advocate before elevating anyone to sainthood. What Brother Cuthbert and your wife have told me has intrigued me, but I cannot resist the temptation to play the game. How do you know that the angels which speak to you are unfallen, and are not the servants of Satan?"

"I dare say that men of my station make easy prey for the Father of Lies, and his agents," Kelley retorted, wishing that he could muster as

much conviction in his words as he had in his soul, and wishing that the dire sensation in his head would let him be, "but I can only say that I *can-not* doubt what I have been told; it is an undeniable revelation. If it turns out to be false, I dare say the only cost will be my own eternal damnation. I believe, given that balance of penalty and reward, that my angels are entitled to a fair hearing."

"I would not wish it otherwise," said Bruno, glancing at Dee with a spark in his eye. "I can hardly wait."

#### 4

Before John Dee locked himself away with his books and his quills to make his calculations, in response to the suggestion that Kelley had given him, he sent a manservant into London. The servant had instructions to find Sir Francis Drake, if he could, and tell him quietly that Master Dee would appreciate a visit from him, begging him to exercise the utmost discretion in the meantime.

Kelley watched the man leave with mixed feelings, fully convinced of the desirability of his carrying the message, but also painfully conscious of the fact that he was the only manservant Dee had. The mathematician's sons were mere infants, Bruno and Cuthbert were monks, and the house was otherwise full of women—Dee's mother, wife and daughters, his own wife, and two maidservants. If the Church Militant were to come calling, there would not be the least possibility of offering any defense. The mysterious savior who had released him from Hungerford jail might still be watching over him as best he could, but he must also have other matters demanding his attention, else he would presumably have stayed with the men he had saved.

While Dee worked, Giordano Bruno was very enthusiastic to interrogate Kelley regarding the background to the statements he had made in the library. The Dominican did not even know as much as common English rumor-mongers about Dee's ill-fated ether-ship. It was obvious that Dee had complete trust in the Italian scholar, but Kelley felt obliged to be circumspect, and resolved to tell him no more than any tavern rumor-monger would have been glad to let him know. He went outside in the hope of clearing his head, but Bruno followed him into the kitchen garden behind the house. When Kelley leaned on the rickety fence, looking in the direction of the river, Bruno did likewise.

"How did you come to lose your ears, Master Kelley?" Bruno asked.

"They were severed by the hangman," Kelley told him. "I was charged with forgery. I was guilty. I've had a long career as a faker, ever since I was apprenticed as a boy to an apothecary. He was a faker too, but his fakery was licensed. Mine overstrayed that boundary."

"But you're not faking now?" Bruno persisted. "You really do believe that you can talk to angels?"

"Fakery becomes a habit," Kelley replied, so deflated and sober he almost wished that his angel-gifted giddiness might increase again to an intoxicant degree. "Charlatans often fall victim to their own deceptions,

as I've had some opportunity to observe. I cannot doubt that I have had congress with angels—but the fact that I cannot doubt it might only indicate that I am victim to delusion. I've always nursed the ambition to be an honest magician, and now that I seem to be one, it might be that the force of my ambition has inhibited my judgment."

"There are powerful men on the continent who'd be glad to burn you alive merely for harboring that ambition," Bruno told him, catching his somber mood, "whether it had borne fruit or not. There's pressure on the Holy Father even to declare the principle of plenitude heretical, although that's a matter of factional in-fighting rather than committed faith. Such items of belief have become banners behind which rivals rally, no more meaningful than heraldic coats of arms—but people will likely die for them, as tension builds within Christendom. We live in turbulent times, which are unpromising for false magicians and true ones alike."

"There are men in England who'd be glad to bring back the burnings," Kelley admitted, dolefully, "in spite of Queen Jane's declarations of tolerance."

"And yet, Master Kelley," Bruno said, pensively, "there's a sense in which you and John Field have more in common with one another than you have with John Dee. Dee, if I judge him right, is a Sadducist, who is deeply skeptical regarding the reality of any and all spiritual beings save the Lord Himself—and I suspect that he has doubts even about the Lord. You speak of angels while Field rants about demons, but you are, at least, speaking the same language."

"And you belong to an Order whose reason for existence is to root our heretics by any means possible," Kelley pointed out. "Which makes you strange company for Doctor Dee the Protestant Sadducist, does it not?"

"Sir Philip Sidney provided me with an introduction to Doctor Dee," the Dominican replied, equably. "My intention is go on to the Countess of Pembroke's estate when the occasion presents itself, where I've been promised security. You're keeping company with a Dominican yourself, without seeming to reckon him an adversary—or is that simply a matter of the enemy of your enemy being your friend?" Bruno nodded his head toward the kitchen door as he spoke; Brother Cuthbert had gone to sleep in one of the kitchen chairs, having suffered more from the day's exertions than Kelley

"It was a matter of convenience when I made his acquaintance," Kelley confessed, "but I feel an obligation now. Thanks to me, he was arrested and thrown in jail, and then escaped. He returned good for evil by taking me to a safe haven last night. He's a marked man now, thanks to me—but he has nothing to do with the mission the angels entrusted to me. Nor do you."

"I do now," Bruno stated, flatly. "For what it may be worth, I follow a doctrine of tolerance myself, although it has made me suspect within my own order. I don't believe that fire is the best medicine for heresy—and I'm certain that the spread of Protest has proved my point. I'm no longer minded to believe, though, that my enemies' enemies are my friends. The world is a deal more complicated than that, I fear."

"Agreed," said Kelley, knowing full well that the Dominican was prompting him to tell him more about exactly how complicated the world really was.

"Brother Cuthbert is racked by his conscience," Bruno said, "unable to get rid of the suspicion that it was a demon who freed him from Hungerford jail."

"Whatever it was," Kelley said, equably, "Brother Cuthbert would be most unwise to admit that suspicion to Field's men—or to his Romanist confessor."

"Agreed," said Bruno. "We all have too many enemies nowadays, even among our friends. We hardly need invaders from the moon, or beyond—although, if we are to face such invaders, I suppose it would be as well if we had angels on our side. If there really is a new war in Heaven, though, I suppose we must have enemies among the angels, too. Is the war a new rebellion of the fallen, do you know, or has some new Lucifer sprung up to repeat the folly of the old?" Brother Cuthbert had obviously told Bruno what Kelley had said to him in the jail.

"I cannot tell," Kelley said, uneasily. "I don't understand much of what the angels say, but I don't think that it's simply a matter of revolt. Perhaps there are nations of angels, just as there are nations of men, which feel the need to go to war even though they all believe that they are serving God. As above, so below—isn't that what mystics say?"

"If the principle of plenitude were strictly applied," Bruno said, nodding his head in recognition of the occultist's motto, "I suppose that one might find warring nations in every capsule creation—even one that might extend through the spaces between the stars. One might have hoped, I suppose, that ours was the only Creation unlucky enough to have suffered a Fall, and that all the others were happy, peaceful, and united . . . but that was not the vision that Digges, Drake, and Field were gifted under the influence of the ether, according to the accounts I've lately had of Doctor Dee's experiment. They seem to have glimpsed an Empire as proud and hopeful as the Church of Rome, and much vaster, but teetering on the brink of its own Protest. As above, so below, as you rightly observe . . . and so, perhaps, *ad infinitum*."

"You shall know more tonight," Kelley promised him, a little sulkily, "if Doctor Dee gives you permission to be present when I speak to the angels."

"You would refuse permission, if it were up to you?" Bruno retorted. "Well, I suppose I cannot blame you for that, given what I am—but I shall be there nevertheless, and I hope that Master Dee will permit Brother Cuthbert to be there too. His curiosity and ignorance are more of a threat to you now than his enlightenment could ever be."

Kelley knew that, and acknowledged it before the Italian finally turned back to go into the house. Kelley remained there a little longer, still staring at the stretch of the Thames that was visible between two of the sheds full of fishing-tackle. As the twilight faded, the ferrymen plying the river increased the urgency of their rowing, but the barge-horses hauling cargoes with or against the current maintained their own stately pace, seemingly immune to anxiety or persuasion. Kelley went back inside himself, to search for his wife. He felt in desperate need of loyal and innocent company for a while—but even Ann, given the circumstances, could not think of anything else.

"We should never have come here," she told him. "We should have gone

our own way, among our own kind. It's not for the likes of us to heed the summons of angels."

"When the angels issue commands," Kelley told her, not for the first time, "obedience is not a matter of choice." But he saw by the way she looked at him that even her loyalty, let alone her innocence, could no longer be taken for granted. She could no more believe that he was under an irresistible compulsion than he could deny it—but she had got the stone and the powder here safely, without requiring the intervention of any ambiguous superhuman assistant, and that was something for which he had to be wholly and heartily thankful.

"I could do nothing without you," he told her. "I could not bear to be alone, even in better circumstances than this. Now that I am what I have become, I need you more than ever."

Even that, he could see, she found difficult to trust—but she was his wife, and she was bound to pretend.

"I need you by my side this evening," he said. "You know how much it sometimes hurts me to have congress with the angels—tonight, I might be required to bear more than ever before. I need you with me, to give me strength and purpose."

"I shall be there," she promised, but she meant that she would be there in the flesh, not necessarily with him in spirit.

5

The black stone was formed as a disc, slightly more than a handspan in diameter, tapered at the edge so that it bore some resemblance to a convex glass lens. It had been polished as if it were a lens, but the polish had not increased its reflective quality as much as might have been expected. When Kelley held it in such a way that his line of sight was directed at the center of the disc the reflective gleam was almost negligible, so that he did indeed seem to be looking through a glass window into a realm of starless darkness. It was important that he did not try to focus his eyes on the obsidian surface, but looked through the implicit portal into that other realm, striving to catch sight of the glimmer of angelic wings.

Angel shadows did have wings; he was sure of that. What they lacked, in their tentative manifestation within the dark imaginary spaces of the stone, was the humanoid bodies with which Earthly illustrators often equipped them. The stone's angels had no faces, and spoke by other means than lips and tongues. Nor were their wings the bird-like wings that illustrators often drew; they bore a closer resemblance to fast-vibrating insect wings, whose form was impossible to detect within the blur of motion. They were always in motion, even when the angels seemed stationary in the imaginary focal plane of the marvelous lens; indeed, Kelley often got the impression that the angels had to move with exceptional swiftness in order to appear to be hovering motionless.

It was not easy to catch sight of an angel, and the sight, when caught, hurt his eyes a little—but not nearly as much as the inaudible sound of

their voices, which boomed in the private spaces inside his head with a strangely explosive force and cataracts of inconvenient echoes. It was not the direct reverberation of the imagined sound that sometimes caused his body to shake, but a kind of sympathy. Nor, he suspected, was it the sound itself that racked his whole soul, seemingly subjecting all his humors to a menacing turbulence; that too was an exotic kind of resonance. *As above so below*, the saying had it—and there was, after all, a new and bitter war in Heaven.

Jane Dee had provided the entire household with a good meal before they repaired to the library for the séance, and Kelley had been better fed than he had for many a week, but the very richness of the food—not to mention the headiness of the French wine—had overburdened his stomach and his spirit alike. He wondered, belatedly, whether it might not have been better to make his demonstration on an empty stomach, fueled by hunger and the intoxicating effects of Heavenly exaltation.

The servant sent to London had not returned, so there were five people gathered in the room, three in chairs and two—Ann Kelley and Brother Cuthbert—wedged a trifle uncomfortably between the shelves. Kelley had been offered the better armchair but had refused, so Bruno had taken it. Dee had the poorer one, although he also had the writing-desk that would enable him to make a hasty transcript of everything that Kelley said, or as much as he had time to reproduce. Kelley had contented himself with a three-legged stool, knowing that he would have to support his elbows on the table-top in order to maintain his pose relative to the carefully supported stone.

There were worse things than the food in his stomach, though, to make him uneasy as he stared into the darkness in search of angels. He did not know which angel would catch his attention first; Aristocles did not have a monopoly on his attention, and the others he had met were not nearly as polite—or, he suspected, as honest—in their dealings with him. He had warned Dee that there might be some delay in contacting Aristocles, but Dee had not reacted with suspicion. Apparently the calculations he had been able to make that afternoon had confirmed the proof that Kelley had offered him regarding the geometry of the solar system.

His anxieties were justified; as soon as he caught sight of the blur of wings, he knew that it was not Aristocles with whom he had to deal. At first, the voice in his head babbled in the strange language—if it really was a language—that Kelley had named after the Biblical patriarch Enoch who had, it was rumored, sent back intelligence of the first War in Heaven, in a book that no one in Europe had ever seen. Eventually, though, English words began to emerge from the syllabic chaos.

"Infinitesimal," said the voice in his head, inaudible to all but him. "Human."

Kelley repeated the words aloud, and made his reply audibly, although he knew that the angel would be able to hear him if he only formulated the words silently, in the privacy of his skull. "To whom am I speaking?" he asked.

"Call me Muram," said the angel; Kelley repeated the words even as they were sounded in his head, although that compounded the suspicion

he already entertained that he might be inventing the words rather than truly hearing them. Muram was not a name that had been offered to him before, but the individual knew English, and must have learned it from Aristocles, or another that Aristocles had taught. The angels appeared to be remarkably quick learners, but Aristocles had assured him that they did have to learn.

"I need to speak with Aristocles," Kelley said. "I have given Dee the proof, and he is waiting for a message."

"Aristocles divides too thinly," Muram said. "Reckless. Fleshcores are insistent, but divided even amongst themselves. Chaos is come to trivial matter, Darkness and Transfiguration will follow. When Transfiguration comes, our kind takes refuge. Aristocles is nascent, has not mastered the Memory. Will learn. Petty disputes of humans and insects *immaterial*. Joke."

As Kelley recited these words aloud for the benefit of his hearers he felt himself losing track of them, as if repetition might save him the trouble of trying to remember them, let alone interpret them. He made his own reply, though, saying: "John Dee is here, as Aristocles wished. He is eager to hear what the angels have to tell him."

"Mortal creatures incapable of metamorphosis, let alone refuge," Muram replied, gnomically. "Destiny is death, petty wars not our concern. Nascent are foolish; have been transformers before, and will be again, but the Memory always triumphant. Contact with material minds amusing, but. . ."

The blur was abruptly displaced by another. For a few moments, the two co-existed, while Kelley completed his repetition of Muram's words. Kelley was able by now to recognize the pattern of Aristocles' wing-beats.

"Time presses, human," Aristocles said. "Dee sees me?"

Kelley glanced sideways. Dee, who was peering intently over his shoulder, shook his head.

"He is looking into the stone, but cannot see you," Kelley told the angel. "I will try to teach him to see, but I do not know whether the trick can be learned. There is another scholar present, named Giordano Bruno, but Drake has not come yet."

"Digges?" the angel queried.

"Not in England, at present—at war in the Netherlands."

"Digges must come home. Other wars are immaterial now. Great Fleshcores are trying to assert authority over Lunars, but Lunars control hyperetheric transit systems in this region of matter-shadow, and many ultraetheric canals. Rebel hardcores are attempting cruder means of transit, but are too few, must have suffered losses. Hardcores will side with humans, as will spiders, initially—but spiders have their own plans, might prove a direr threat if theirs is the victory. Dee must make preparations to withstand any remnants of the Lunar Armada that reach the surface. Engage them in the atmosphere, if possible. Build ether-ships, if possible. Meet the Armada in the upper atmosphere. Will provide specifications, if Dee or other scholar can learn to see and hear me. Fleshcores must save and sustain as much of True Civilization as they can; if they cannot maintain their own unity of purpose, all is lost. Time is pressing. Dee has ten years, at the most—more likely five. He will need Drake, and Digges most of all."

"What I would need most of all," Dee told Kelley, while scribbling furiously, "if we were to undertake any such project as the building of more ether-ships, is money. My income from the Muscovy Company is hardly enough nowadays to maintain my household, and my library is suffering for lack of acquisition. The queen will not help me again. Without wealth, any hope of keeping our enemies at bay is bound to be frail."

Kelley relayed these complaints, repeating them word for word.

"Will guide you in making gold," Aristocles said. "Wealth is achievable. Keeping human enemies at bay is harder, but it can be done, with or without the hardcores' reluctant aid. There is a plan. Be patient."

"I'd certainly need assistance, as well as wealth, if I agreed to do what you ask," Dee said. "Even if your red powder is the alchemical touchstone, and your black stone a means of communication between Earth and Heaven, possession of such things will cement the conviction of our human enemies that we are devil-led. They're already snapping at your heels, Kelley, and I don't doubt that they'll be after me as soon as they discover that you've been here, if I don't hand you over."

"Have patience and tolerance," was Aristocles' reply to that. "Mathematical devices are easy; alchemical transformations are more difficult, but possible. Nature makes angels better masters of mathematics than of chemistry, but we see matter from a propitious angle. Sciences of life are mysterious to us, though not to spiders—cause for anxiety but not alarm. Human scholars are better mental arithmeticians than Lunars, but their command of the material sciences is far in advance of yours. Exceedingly difficult to fight them, if they can establish viable nests, but not impossible to prevent them. Have hope, and faith. Greatest advantage you have is *affinity*. Lunars have already made one mistake in that kind of calculation, may make others yet; scope for resistance. Must teach others to use stone, or find others who can. Must find other stones, if you can. Time past now; Fleshcores are insistent. Try again, and again. Pay no heed to the contempt and despair of others of my kind. I am nascent, but so is the world. This time, there might be true Transformation, God willing."

The flickering image in the black lens vanished into the obscurity then. Although he was not quivering nearly as much as he sometimes did, Kelley felt a sharp pain in his chest as the angel departed, and a sudden numbness in his left arm. He fell off his stool. He did not quite lose consciousness, but he was very dazed. Ann, Dee, and Bruno tried to revive him. Eventually, they were able to draw him up and put him in the good armchair.

"Well, Brother Cuthbert," Giordano Bruno said to the English Dominican, "What did you think of that?"

Brother Cuthbert's face was rather pale, and he was sweating, although the room was certainly not warm. "I don't understand what happened," he said, "but I did not recognize the voices of angels in anything that was said."

"Perhaps not," Bruno said, thoughtfully. "But I did not recognize the Devil's voice either. If there are indeed more Creations than you or I could ever hope to count, including Creations within the ether, perhaps we heard the voices of other creatures, at least as like to men as Balaam's ass."

"Or the serpent in Eden," Cuthbert suggested.

"No," said John Dee, sharply. "Whatever we might doubt, or fear, the voice is offering us assistance in a coming struggle, against creatures out of nightmare. Either that, or . . ."

"Or what?" Ann Kelley put in, anticipating the inevitable.

"Or your husband is a veritable genius among tricksters," Dee said—but hastened to add: "In much the same fashion as Francis Drake, I dare say, who was mad enough to sail around the world in pursuit of proof of his own strange vision. Tom Digges is the man we really need, if he is now able to recall his ether-dream as something other than an idle fancy. If not . . . well, in either case, he's the only one who might be judge whether Kelley's angel really is the vaporous creature that Drake saw, or imagined, invading his flesh." Dee seemed to be wrestling with his doubts, but Kelley could see that the mathematician certainly wanted to believe that what he had just heard was no mere mountebank's blather, even if he had to believe, as a corollary, that England and the world were in peril.

"You must confess," Brother Cuthbert opined, "that all this talk of Lunars, Fleshcores, and Hardcores seems exceedingly ominous. If there are orders of demons parallel to the various orders of angels identified by Dionysius the Areopagite—as there surely must be, given that demons are merely fallen angels—I could easily believe that they might identify themselves by names of that sort."

"Perhaps," Bruno admitted. "But think how many orders there are of living beings, and how very various their species are. If the principle of plenitude holds true, whatever can be created, God has surely created, perhaps in the etheric wilderness if not on Earth or some other planetary surface. What we have heard might well be testimony to the awesome generosity of divine creativity, applied to a plurality of worlds of near-infinite variety. But what, I wonder, did your ether-dweller mean by *true* Transformation? Why did the other say that Chaos is come, and that Darkness and Transfiguration will follow?"

"I don't know," Kelley whispered, forlornly.

"Worlds should be separate," Brother Cuthbert opined. "Creations should not mix and mingle. Once they begin to overlap, Chaos *is* come, with Darkness inevitably to follow. If England, or humankind, is in need of deliverance, we must pray for that deliverance. All else is . . ."

He trailed off; Kelley noticed that he had not reached for his rosary.

"The purpose of prayer is not to make us passive," Bruno said, sternly. "If England or humankind is in need of deliverance, we must certainly pray—but pray that God will guide our hands and minds, in order that we might contend against the forces of destruction. I do not understand the half of what the second voice said, but I do understand what it said by way of conclusion, which is that we might prevail against the forces of destruction, *God willing*."

Kelley opened his mouth, intending to say that God had always been an enemy of Chaos, and a bringer of light into Darkness, and so must surely be willing to guard his Creation against such dire fates, but his mouth was too dry to permit him to pronounce the words. By the time he had moistened it with saliva, the séance had been interrupted by a rapping on the door of the house.

It was, Kelley was thankful to observe, a polite rapping rather than a thunderous hammering. If the unwanted visitors were hounds or foxes, they were obviously not confident of their might.

"Wait here," Dee commanded. "Keep quiet—listen, if you can, but make no sound."

Moments later, Dee called to Bruno for help, and the Italian hurried from the library, followed by Kelley and Brother Cuthbert. Dee's knees were buckling as he tried to support the body of his servant, who had apparently collapsed into his arms. As Dee moved back from the door, though, Kelley saw that the messenger had not returned alone. Two other men were waiting outside for the way to clear, their faces shielded by hoods.

Bruno picked up the injured man's legs, taking part of his weight; he and Dee carried the servant into the room closest to the door, a reception-room where there was a sofa on which he could be set down. The other two men moved inside the house, the latter closing the front door behind him. The former pushed back his hood and looked Kelley up and down, from his ear-less skull to his sole-less boots, with an unmistakably aristocratic contempt. The other kept his hood up, and seemed to be shrinking back into the shadows—which were abundant now that Dee had set the candle-tray down within the room.

"You're Edward Kelley, the man for whom Field's bully-boys are searching," the aristocrat stated, in a tone that attempted politeness.

"Am I?" Kelley countered. "I do not know you, sir."

"So much the better," the aristocrat said. He turned to his companion. "I have business elsewhere," he said. "Will you come?"

The hooded man—whose humanity suddenly seemed to Kelley to be less than definite—gestured with his hand toward the door, as if he were instructing the aristocrat to go without him. As the other turned, though, the hooded head leaned forward and words were muttered swiftly into his ear, so quietly that Kelley could not catch what was said. The hooded figure opened the door then to let his companion out—but not before John Dee had appeared in the doorway of the reception-room.

"De Vere?" said Dee. "Is that really you?"

If Dee's identification was correct, Kelley knew, then the aristocrat was the Earl of Oxford—but it was his turn now to keep his face in the shadows. "Edward de Vere is dead," he said. "Believe that, Master Dee—you have trouble enough at your door without knowing otherwise. If you have a boat, you had best take to the river and row upstream, as quickly as you can. Greenwich is a battlefield. The foxes moved to arrest Drake, but sorely underestimated the number of men who would come to his defense, and had to call for reinforcements. Foxe does not understand seamen, or hero-worship. You'll not find any to stand up for you when they come here—as they would surely have done already had they not been badly delayed. Find a bolt-hole as far from London as you can. Set sail for France if you must."

De Vere—if it was, in fact, de Vere—did not wait for a reply to this rig-

marole. He slipped out of the door and vanished, while the hooded figure closed the door behind him, then barred and bolted it.

"Do not be alarmed," the hooded figure said softly, before pushing back the hood to reveal a face that was sculpted in a human image, but seemed to be forged in dull metal—save for the eyes, which were red in color and made of some softer substance. It did not look to Kelley to be a mask, but he did not faint in shock. He had grown used to miracles lately, and everyone in Europe had heard tales of talking heads of bronze built by Roger Bacon and Albertus Magnus. Ann and John Dee looked at the artificial face with as much admiration and curiosity as horror and dread; only Brother Cuthbert seemed excessively distressed by the sight.

"You broke me out of Hungerford jail," Kelley said, regretting that it sounded more like an accusation than an expression of gratitude.

"Yes I did," said the metal-faced creature, its voice clear although its polished lips barely moved. "I hoped to warn the others before the Puritans made their move, but I was too late to reach Drake, and might only have succeeded in exposing Master Smith to greater risk."

"Master Smith?" echoed Dee, skeptically.

"That is the name by which my erstwhile companion is known in London," the metal-faced individual stated.

Kelley could not see Dee's face very clearly, but he took note of the shock of realization that came upon it. "De Vere's an Elizabethan, damn it!" Dee said. "If it were not enough to have the Church Militant arrayed against us, we now have the Queen's enemies in our camp."

"You do not know who that man was," the other reminded him, its red eyes glinting in the candlelight. "So far as you are aware, Edward de Vere is dead, and you have had no contact whatsoever with any kind of treason."

"More to the point," said Kelley, "who—or what—are you?"

"An ally to the creature who calls himself Aristocles, for the moment," the other replied. "I'm a sentient machine—an automaton, if you like—designed by the Lunars to operate in the toils of excessive affinity. You might have heard my kind called by the name *hardcore*, because our supportive skeletons are contained within our flesh rather than armoring it without—you're *hardcores* too, by that reckoning. You might think me monstrous, but the Lunars would consider the two of us very much alike, intrinsically horrid in exactly the same fashion: mollusks turned inside-out."

Bruno called out to Dee before the mathematician could demand further explanation, and the dutiful master hurried back to his injured servant. Kelley and the metal man followed him into the room. Brother Cuthbert, who had stayed behind Kelley throughout the exchange, stayed in the doorway with Ann.

Dee knelt down beside the servant, who was still conscious, although his jerkin and hose were stained with a great deal of blood. "Master Drake sends his apologies, sir," the servant said, in a voice that was little more than a whisper. "He will take to sea, if he cannot win the fight on land, but he will send a messenger to you, if he can, when he reaches safe harbor."

"Aye," Dee murmured, "but where to?"

"If Foxe can persuade Suffolk and Northumberland to send the Queen's

men in support of Field's," the injured servant whispered, "the dockland rabble will melt away like the spring thaw—but the *Golden Hind* won't be obstructed as she sails down the estuary. Once she's gone, alas, the Church Militant will certainly come here. They'll not molest your wife and children, Master Dee, but Master Smith was right to advise you that you and Kelley must go."

"If he is wise," the metal man put in, "the man who escaped from Hungerford with Kelley will go too, and this man too." *This man* was Bruno, who was staring at the automaton as curiously as Dee had, with the same surplus of wonderment over anxiety.

Kelley was more concerned about Ann than Brother Cuthbert, while Dee's sideways glance demonstrated his anxiety for his own Dominican guest—but it was the most urgent question of all that Dee voiced: "Where can we find safety, now?"

"I cannot tell you that," the metal man said. "I can help you along the road, but I cannot tell where you might find safe haven."

"If I could get to the Queen . . ." Dee began.

"No, sir," the hardcore cut him off. "You cannot go to London."

"It's true, Master," the servant said. "It's far too dangerous. If you escape by boat, as Master Smith suggested, you must not go downriver. Even if you were able to reach the Tower, you'd be putting your head in a lion's mouth."

"The Queen is an exceedingly clever woman," Dee told the metal man, "and no Puritan. She's perfectly capable of listening to reason."

"If this were a matter of intellect and sanity," Bruno put in, "you might be right—but it's a matter of fear and panic, the like of which I've already seen in more than one continental city. I don't know what resources your Church Militant has to compare with Master Kelley's magic stone, but there seems to be something telling its zealots that the Devil is at hand and must be crushed."

"Aye," Dee agreed, reluctantly. "Foxe may not believe Field's rants about demons, but he seems to be grateful for the excuse to let his loyal Churchmen flex their muscles. The one thing that unites all the Lords whose ambition the Queen keeps in delicate balance, alas, is their fear of the Elizabethans, and the rumor that de Vere is alive is all over the city. My past association with him will further taint me in their fearful eyes. For now, at least, we must retreat."

"If I understood the angels right," Kelley put in, "we must find a safe place to build more ether-ships, and to prepare to resist an invasion."

"It's all very well for the ether-dwellers to dictate orders," Dee replied, churlishly, "but if it's England we're supposed to defend, we can hardly set sail with Drake for the Americas or the south seas, even if we can reach him."

"We must go," the automaton said, flatly. "The ethereal is right: the Lunars *will* strike here, even if Master Dee is removed. The mere fact of the ether-ship's ascent convinced them that England's New Learning is the forefront of human progress. The Lunars will attempt usurpation, however, before they resort to annihilation. Their ultimate war is with the Great Fleshcores, against whom they will need armaments of every kind,

and an army of natural hardcores might be as useful to them as to the Arachnids."

"But if Drake was telling the truth all along about his adventure among the stars," Dee objected, "we surely have nothing that the Empires of the stars could possibly want. You're the proof that they already have machines that mimic our form—machines that are more powerful than we are, even on our own terrain."

"That's not true," the automaton retorted. "I have access to rudimentary chemical technology even here, but I suffer the burdens of weight exactly as you do; I'm no Titan. In any case, you're a greater prize than you might imagine, given your mathematical skills. Don't imagine that Aristocles and I are acting out of pure altruism, and have no delusions about the Arachnids. The Lunars could destroy you very easily if they wished, but they will only do that if all else fails, to prevent you from becoming part of a powerful alliance against them. We do not have time for this—Doctor Dee and Master Kelley must flee, and must preserve the black stone and the red powder at all costs. I will help you, but I cannot tell you where to go."

"I can," Giordano Bruno put in. "I can, at least, make a suggestion as to who would surely hide you, and defend you if need be."

"Who?" asked Dee. Kelley judged by the wariness in his voice that he did not want to surrender himself to the care of the Dominican Order—but neither, Kelley strongly suspected, did the renegade Bruno.

"Philip Sidney's sister—Mary Herbert, Countess of Pembroke," Bruno said. "She's expecting me."

Dee nodded. "George Herbert was formerly married to the Queen's sister," the mathematician said, presumably to enlighten Kelley, Ann, and Cuthbert, "but he was never admitted to the inner circles of the court because his father had been too much involved with the Tudors, and was suspected of sympathizing with Mary Tudor's bid to seize the throne. The Earl maintains a diplomatic absence, fighting in the Netherlands with Sidney, but the Countess keeps a little empire of her own at Wilton, near Salisbury. It might make a good hiding-place—and as good a base as any to begin any project we might feel inclined to undertake, if we decide to take the ether-dwellers' advice."

Kelley pursed his lips. He had passed within twenty miles of Wilton the day before he had fetched up at the Black Bear and been thrown into Hungerford jail. He had had such a hard time getting here from there that the thought of retracing his steps was not particularly attractive. "Better to head for the south coast," he opined, "where we might make a rendezvous with Drake."

"Wherever you end up," the automaton said, "You must make rapid preparations now to depart."

It seemed, however, that they had already delayed too long, for there was another knock on the door then, considerably less polite than Master Smith's, followed by a call to open up in the Queen's name.

The automaton looked directly at Kelley then, his red eyes glinting in the candlelight. Unhuman as the creature was, Kelley had no trouble deciphering the message in that glance. John Dee was fifty-five years old; the two friars were not fighting men, and the stricken manservant was

too weak to lift a finger. If there was fighting to be done, Kelley and the metal man would be the only ones capable of bearing arms effectively—and neither of them was carrying so much as a kitchen-knife.

Dee called out to the men beyond the door, telling them to wait.

"Fetch the stone and the powder," the automaton whispered to Kelley. "We must go out at the back of the house and head for the river. Your wife must stay here—you and I will have difficulty enough keeping Dee safe."

"You cannot leave me here!" Bruno whispered, urgently.

"Nor me," Brother Cuthbert was quick to add, while Kelley leapt into the library to secure the stone, which he wrapped in a cloth. Ann had followed him. "Don't leave me again!" she begged.

"I must," he told her. "Fetch the powder first, though—I'll see to the stone. Jane Dee will shelter you as best she can, and the Puritans won't harm her."

Ann did not like it, but she nodded her head like the obedient wife she was, and went to fetch the packet of powder that might, it seemed, enclose an alchemical touchstone capable of making gold.

There was another complication already, because a new voice could be heard outside the front of the house, demanding to know what the men who had knocked were doing. Someone else had evidently arrived in their wake.

Kelley heard Dee murmur: "Francis Bacon! He came this afternoon, to see Bruno. He has no authority over Foxe's men, though."

The man who replied to Bacon that he had been sent to arrest John Dee replied so faintly and querulously, though, that he was obviously not confident of his own authority.

"They're hounds, not foxes!" Dee was quick to infer, his voice still audible to Kelley as he ducked into the library. "Nor have they come in force. The Church Militant is fully occupied in London and Greenwich, it seems, and nothing has reached Mortlake but a command that the local constables have no great enthusiasm to carry out."

When Kelley returned to the corridor Dee was sliding back the bolts. He joined the mathematician and helped him lift the bar.

There were only two constables outside; their superior had not thought it worthwhile to rouse and arm a stronger force. When the man who had shouted the demand to open up saw how many people were grouped inside the door—the automaton, who had raised his hood again, must have appeared to him to be a person, but quite able-bodied—his lantern trembled, testifying to his consternation. Sir Francis Bacon was behind them, wearing a sword and accompanied by a manservant equipped with a heavy staff. The constables only had cudgels.

"Have you a warrant, constable?" Dee asked, holding up his own candle as if to challenge the constable's lantern.

The senior constable did not even have that; Kelley guessed that his superior had never intended the two men to make an arrest, but had sent them as a tacit warning, while carefully protecting his own virtue. It would suit the local officials more were Dee to make his escape than it would to imprison him on behalf of John Foxe and John Field. Puritan sympathies did not run particularly high in Mortlake.

Dee put on his most imperious voice to order the two men to go away, and to come back when they had proper authority to arrest him—nor did he promise to wait for them. Bacon, meanwhile, had his hand on the hilt of his sword, and he looked like the kind of young aristocrat who might take delight in giving a couple of hounds a tumble.

The constables withdrew, in some haste. Bacon moved swiftly to Dee's side. "I came to warn you and Master Bruno, sir," he said. "All hell has broken loose in the city. The Tower's ablaze with candlelight and humming like a beehive; the members of parliament are being rooted out of the brothels, and no one is sure that the navy will not fire upon the army in defense of the Queen's privateers. Foxe may be sleeping content in Canterbury, but the hullabaloo is loud enough to wake him. In a better world, he'd turn on Field and disown him, but I fear he'll find himself committed now, whether he likes it or not. You must hide, at least for a few days, until the state of play is clear. I'll look after your wife, and your library, as best I can."

"Thank you, Francis," Dee said. "Master Bruno and I will take a little trip upriver, I think. I'll send word to you when I can."

Bacon's gaze had already slipped sideways, to study Edward Kelley and the hooded individual. The suspicion in his expression was quite obvious; the young nobleman obviously felt no need to hide his feelings from men whose dress revealed them to be commoners, apparently poor.

"These men are with us," Dee stated. "They are more vital to our cause than you can possibly estimate."

Kelley guessed that what Bacon understood by "our cause" and what Dee meant by it were two very different things.

"Go with God," Bacon said, with a slight bow to Dee. "Be sure that you're safe by daybreak, though. No one can tell where the balance of power will lie by then." He waited for everyone else to go into the house before following them. It was Bacon who bolted and barred the door this time.

It did not take Dee and Bruno long to make up their packs; they were obviously prepared to depart at short notice. Kelley had only to grab the satchel that Ann had brought him, check that the powder was safe inside it, place the stone within it too, and embrace his wife regretfully. "I'll be better for knowing that you're safe here," he told her. "Don't fear for me—I have good friends."

She whispered in his ear: "That metal face is no mask."

"I know," he told her. "There was a man of bronze in ancient times, I think, set to guard Crete, who was said to be the last survivor of an entire race, but Roger Bacon found another like it. If that race is come again, it is to aid us, not to hurt us. I could not wish for a better shield."

He had to leave then, to follow Dee and the automaton out of the kitchen door, through the garden and down to the Thames. Dee's own boat was a mere cockleshell, incapable of carrying five men away, but Dee knew his neighbors well. There was a boatman already awake, making ready for the dawn aboard a ferry-skiff that could seat half a dozen. Dee gave him half a sovereign, and he set to work with a will, ready to row all the way to Twickenham if need be.

Bruno sat down beside Dee, facing the oarsman, as if he were entitled to that place. Brother Cuthbert sat down beside his fellow Dominican, rather fearfully, leaving Kelley to sit with the hooded man in the stern of the boat, so that the latter might be hidden from view to the extent that it was possible. Kelley was by no means dissatisfied with the situation, being very enthusiastic to seize the chance he had not been given before to interrogate his rescuer.

"Did the angels send you here to help us?" he asked, in a whisper.

"My brethren were intent on sending emissaries to your world as soon as they learned of its existence," the automaton told him, speaking in a similarly low tone. "We were the first to understand the necessity, before the ethereals fell out—and I still do not know why the ethereals should have fallen out with one another, or why they care about you at all. Since they seem to be siding with us, however, I'm willing to accept their guidance.

"You can talk to them, then, without the aid of a skrying-stone?"

"They can reach me, if they exert enough effort, and I consent to listen—but the contact disturbs me, and I am obliged to be careful."

Even automata, it seemed, were not immune to the side-effects of communication with the angels. "They said that there is a plan," Kelley said. "Do you know what it is?"

"I'm not privy to the ethereals' secrets," the automaton replied, curtly. "It was not easy for me to reach the surface of your world; we were smuggled into the moon easily enough, but we had no shuttle capable of making a gentle descent, and had to improvise, just as the ethereals improvised in sending the stone and the catalyst. The fall was long and the friction fierce. I don't know whether the others came down safely, but the fact that I've had no word is ominous. I know that I must frighten you, but I swear to you that my kind are the best friends you have in all this confusion."

"You don't frighten me," Kelley said. "I've seen miracles, and have heard the voices of angels. Whether there was a race of metal men on Earth before or not, I'm not afraid to discover that there is one now. But I need to understand why you're so intent on being my friend, when so many of my own kind, as well as half the inhabitants of Heaven and almost all of the greater Creation, seem to be arrayed against me."

"Although I resemble humans in form, your kind is unique," the automaton told him, "and I am bound to side with its defenders."

"Unique?" Kelley queried.

"Unique in fleshy form," the automaton elaborated, "and, in consequence, unique in the specifics of its intelligence. Your sensory apparatus, and your brains, are quite distinct from those of all the members of the True Civilization, and their Arachnid rivals. The ethereals, whose intelligence seems to be fundamentally parasitic, might be interested in you for that reason, although their motives are largely unfathomable to creatures of what they call *trivial matter*. Given that ethereals find it at least

as difficult to operate in a weighty environment as softcores do, in spite of their contempt for our kind of matter, any connections they can build are bound to be tenuous, but even tenuous connections can be valuable, and perhaps warrant conflict among their makers. When even ethereals go to war, softcores are bound to be anxious. Ten years of slow and patient labor in the caverns of the moon have now given way to a period of desperate haste."

Kelley realized, as he listened to this mystifying speech, that he had never really expected to understand what the angels said to him, and had never felt able to raise much objection to their using so many words whose meaning he could not fathom. The automaton was, in its fashion, no less strange than the angels—and evidently believed that Kelley had understood what the angels had said to him far better than he had—but Kelley felt oddly resentful that his new companion was speaking in much the same fashion, rather than taking greater pains to make himself clear. Before he could voice his disappointment, though, Giordano Bruno had turned round to interrupt.

"I need to know," he said to the automaton, in a low voice, "where the Devil figures in this. I may be a better scholar than I am a Dominican, but I am a Dominican, after all."

"I cannot tell you that," the automaton said. "Where God and the Devil stand, if any such entities exist, only they know. Even the ethereals move in darkly mysterious ways, although it may well be vanity that leads them to pretend to be God's messengers and handmaidens. I can tell you, though, where my brethren stand, and that is in the shoes of slaves ambitious to be free. Some might think the existence of natural hardcores irrelevant to our purpose, but I do not. Even if it were only a matter of politics, it would open scope for alliance with the Arachnids and some ethereals, but it is far more than that. Your intelligence and ours must be akin, give our common form. Our brains have been programmed by creatures of a very different sort; if we are truly to be free, we must learn to think in our own way—in the way that we might and ought to share with you. We will not allow you to be exterminated or transfigured, while we have any chance at all of helping to save you. There is much we might learn from one another."

Now it was Dee's turn to look round and interrupt. "If Tom Digges really did make the treaty that he became convinced he had only dreamed," he said, similarly speaking in a low tone, "were we not promised the protection of the entire True Civilization? Were we not promised that no one would try to exterminate or transfigure us?"

"You were," the automaton agreed. "And the Great Fleshcores would honor that promise, if they could—but the promise proved to be the last straw, which overburdened an authority long since stretched to its limit. The insects have broken away from the True Civilization, as they might always have been bound to do, and they are the ones who are bent on your suppression, if only to prevent you from becoming pawns of the Arachnids or new symbols of Fleshcore hegemony. Even the Lunars would rather control you than obliterate you, though—they are neither utterly reckless nor devoid of moral responsibility. If nothing else, control

of your world's surface might be a useful bargaining-chip in their dealings with the ethereals, which they do seem enthusiastic to develop."

"But why me?" Kelley whispered, having finally found an opportunity to get back into the conversation. "Why am I involved in this at all, given that I knew nothing of Dee's ether-ship? Why did the black stone speak to me?"

"Because you found it," was the metal man's blunt reply, "and because you could hear the voices it reflected—which seems to be a rarer gift than the ethereals must have hoped. There are strange alchemical affinities and exotic connections between the kinds of matter you know and those of the dark realm, which the ethereals can manipulate. There must, I think, be affinities of another sort between the intelligences that our matter contains and the intelligences of dark matter. Perhaps you're uniquely privileged, and perhaps you were merely convenient—but for now, at least, you're the best and sturdiest link between men and ethereals. They'll be very enthusiastic to build more and better ones, but I doubt that they have any clearer idea of their prospects in that regard than you have. Could you train Dr. Dee to use the stone, do you think?"

"No," Kelley said decisively, following his trickster's instinct. "I cannot. It's a gift, not a matter of education. There might be others like me—but there might not. You and Doctor Dee had best be careful with me, if you intend to continue to hold congress with the angels by means of the black stone."

"If you wish, Dr. Dee," Brother Cuthbert put in, "I can make arrangements for us all to stay the night in the same safe-house where Master Kelley and I spent last night. Master Bruno will be very welcome, of course, and his presence will assist me in arguing on your behalf and that of . . . your other friends. Would you like me to do that when we reach Twickenham?"

Bruno looked at Dee, who only hesitated briefly before nodding. "Thank you, Brother Cuthbert," he said. "That will give us pause for reflection. Tell the custodian of the house that we'll go on at first light. It will take two more days to reach Wilton, but we'll get there, God willing."

The oarsman, meanwhile, continued to haul away with his practiced arms, and did so for another hour before tiring. The automaton took over then, with his permission—without any need to display his metal face, which was quite invisible by the lights sprinkled along the shore. Although the creature had disclaimed superhuman strength, he certainly plied the oars with a great deal more power and efficient authority than Kelley could have mustered, and the boat flew upriver, defiant of the sluggish current.

When they reached Twickenham, at a much later hour than the one at which Kelley and Cuthbert had approached the isolated manor house the day before, Cuthbert asked them to wait in a clump of bushes by the towpath while he made arrangements for their hospitality. He promised to be back within a quarter of an hour, and was as good as his word, so far as Kelley could estimate.

"Everything's in hand," the little man said. "You'll all be very welcome."

They passed through the hedge bordering the towpath by means of a wicker gate, and made their way through the manor's lawns and gardens. Instead of going to the tradesmen's entrance they went around the house

to the main door. The housekeeper, who was carrying a tray with a single tallow candle, greeted Kelley with a nod of recognition and bowed to his august companions before leading them through the gloomy vestibule and into the hall that Kelley had crossed twice before. It was unlit, and the housekeeper's candle was feeble, but Kelley followed him with a confidence born of the sense that he was on familiar ground. Dee and Bruno fell into step behind him, while Cuthbert and the automaton brought up the rear.

Kelley heard the waiting men before he saw them, and knew by the clinking sound that betrayed their presence that they were armed.

The metallic sounds were followed by a duller one as something heavy came down from above—but not on top of Kelley, who leapt to one side with his fists raised, ready to make a fight of it. Unfortunately, he moved within range of one of the ambushers, who struck out at him with a club. The blow missed his head and hit his shoulder, but it was so forceful and painful that it knocked him off his feet. Although he scrambled upright as fast as he could, he found himself seized by the arms and the point of a dagger was pressed to his windpipe. When a hoarse whisper bade him be still, he obeyed, and did not resist when his traveling-bag was snatched away.

Strangely, the only man who contrived to put up any meaningful resistance at all was Giordano Bruno, who was as robust and ready for a fight as any recruit to the Church Militant. He had no blade, though, and only succeeded in sending two of his would-be assailants flying before he too was calmed by the threat of being mortally cut.

The light of the single tallow candle was enough to let Kelley see that a weighed rope net had been dropped on the automaton, and that further weights had been moved onto the toils of the net to make sure that the prisoner was securely pinned—as, indeed, it seemed to be; apparently, it had told the truth when it confessed that its strength was not superhuman, and its skill with the oars had been merely that.

John Dee was unable to put up more than feeble resistance. Brother Cuthbert put up none at all, and helped to place the weights securing the net—but it would have been obvious, in any case, that he was their betrayer.

Kelley moved past the shock of that awareness to the more ominous revelation that he had been played for a fool since he first set foot in the Black Bear. The little man must have been waiting for him there—the bait in a trap whose purpose went far beyond any mere matter of throwing him into Hungerford jail. Whoever had designed Brother Cuthbert's task had wanted far more than Edward Kelley, or even the stone and the powder. He had wanted John Dee, and elaborate intelligence as to what Kelley had learned from the angels. Now, he had all of that and an unexpected bonus, in the form of the automaton.

Candles were now being lit in wall-brackets, and an entire candelabrum-full on the table in the center of the hall. These were wax candles, not tallow, and they gave a much brighter light, by means of which Kelley quickly counted their black-clad captors as a dozen, not including the slender and sharp-featured man who had carelessly established himself in the master's place at the head of the oaken table.

Kelley had never met that insolent man, but he knew who it had to be.

Before John Field could issue further orders, however, Giordano Bruno looked at Brother Cuthbert in the most venomous fashion imaginable. "You'll be expelled from the Order for this, Brother!" he said. "If I had the ear of the pope, I'd have you excommunicated."

The little man laughed. "Do you still imagine that I'm a Dominican?" he retorted. "Can you actually believe that your clandestine signs are really secret in Puritan England?" His voice became tauter, however, as he added: "But if I were a Dominican, I'd be fulfilling my mission, would I not? To root out heresy, *by any means possible*."

"Be quiet, Simon," said John Field. By this time, the fox who had taken Kelley's satchel had brought it to the table and set it down. Field rummaged through it, taking out the black stone but ignoring the packet in which the red powder was wrapped. "So this is where your bottle-imp resides," he said, looking not at Kelley but at John Dee. "This is the means by which the Devil whispers in your scholarly ear. How did you lose it in the first place?"

John Dee merely shook his head despairingly.

"Doctor Dee never saw it before today," Kelley said, speaking out boldly. "He certainly did not have it, or anything like it, when he built the ether-ship. It fell to Earth on Northwick Hill, where I found it—and it fell from Heaven, not from Hell. Nor are the angels contained within it; it is more akin to a telescope, making the distant realm of the angels seem closer at hand, enabling them more easily to speak into a man's soul."

Field got up from the table then, leaving the black stone behind. He did not approach Kelley, though; instead, he went to the place just within the threshold of the hall where the automaton was pinned down, and inspected the device as carefully as the thick strands of rope would permit, not without a certain anxiety.

"If further proof were needed of your dealings with the Devil," Field stated, glancing back at John Dee, "we have the most incontrovertible here. You have your own familiar demon, it seems, as Cornelius Agrippa had."

"Agrippa von Nettesheim was a great scholar," Dee told him, seemingly stung more painfully by the slight against another than by any accusation laid at his own door. "He did not write the book of black magic attributed to him."

"But you have read it," Field replied. "And the Key of Solomon too, and God only knows how many other filthy tomes. You've searched for them, and paid good coin for them—and did not even have the grace to hide them away, but have shared them with Digges and the Scotts and the other members of your nest of unholy vipers."

"Do you imagine," Giordano Bruno cut in, contemptuously, "that demons can be caught in nets and pinned down by a timber-merchant's counterweights?"

"Do you imagine that they can be dissolved by holy water and exiled by exorcism?" Field retorted, curling his lip. "Perhaps you think this one is protected by some indulgence that you have sold him, in order that he might remain on Earth in defiance of the Lord's will?"

"It's not a demon," Dee said, quietly. "It's a machine in human form. If you examine it closely, you'll see that it's the work of clever artifice."

"Human artifice?" Field countered—but was quick to add: "Have you examined it closely, Doctor Dee?"

"Not as closely as I would like," Dee admitted. "Your pursuit left me little leisure in which to do so. Nor have I been able to examine the black stone as closely as I would like to do. Did you catch Francis Drake, by the way?"

Field scowled. He said nothing, but Kelley judged that he had no more caught Drake than Edward de Vere. *We were the only ones foolish enough to fall into his trap*, he thought, *and that was entirely my fault, for introducing his agent into John Dee's house as a trusted guest.*

His head had been quiet while they rowed upriver, but it was now recovering all the strange sensation that had afflicted it periodically during the last fortnight, exaggerated to a new pitch of intensity—but it was not pain, or even some subtler malaise. It seemed to him that his head was expanding, growing vast, but he knew that the sensation was an understandable illusion; what was really expanding and flourishing was something else, unconfined by his cranium. It was not magical power either, in any crude sense, but it had some kind of potential in it. It made the atmosphere around him seem light and strange, although no one else appeared to have noticed anything odd. "What do you intend to do with the stone?" Kelley asked, glad that he could still think and speak quite clearly.

Field finally consented to take notice of Kelley. "Rather ask, Master Kelley," was his reply, "What I intend to do with *you*. I intend to put you on trial, with Master Dee by your side, on a charge of sorcery. I intend to rouse the English people to such a pitch of indignation against you and all your foul kind that parliament's policy of craven tolerance will be blown away by the gale of Protest. I intend to make an example of you that will allow the Church Militant to scour England clean of Devil-worship and demon-traffic. I thank you, with all my heart, for making my task so much easier by bringing the demon with you. The stone would have been evidence enough, but, now that I look at it, it's a dull thing after all. Given your reputation as a fortune-teller and false physician, some men might be easily persuaded that it's naught but a rock, and that the voices you claim to have heard from within were nothing but vulgar lies."

"But you know better, do you not, Master Field?" Kelley riposted. "Even though Cuthbert—I mean Simon—has not yet given you a full report of the séance we held this evening, you know full well that the intelligence I have relayed corresponds with your own experiences following the ascent of Doctor Dee's ether-ship."

Field scowled again. "Of course I know that," he said. "They emanate from exactly the same source: the Inferno."

"The same information might come from very different sources," Kelley told him. "Don't the Romanists preach the same Christian message of virtue and loving neighborliness as the Puritans, for all that neither party is able to practice what it preaches? Look into the stone, Master Field. Perhaps you will be able to see and hear the angels that Doctor Dee and Master Bruno cannot."

The automaton had not said a word, and did not say one now, but it stirred in its captivity, and Kelley construed the movement as a gesture of approval.

Field knew that he was being challenged, and knew that he ought not to shirk the challenge. Was not a devout Puritan capable not merely of snaring demons in a net, but of staring Satan in the face and forcing him to look away?

## 8

John Field went back to the table and resumed his seat. He took up the black stone in both hands and held it before his face, as if it were a mirror. He looked into it, perhaps expecting to see himself reflected there, in spite of the stone's lack of polish and the unpropitious placement of the candlelabrum.

Kelley had no idea what to expect. Would Field put the stone down again, claiming that he could see nothing—doubtless because the demons of Hell were impotent or unwilling to confront him—or would he play the trickster, and pretend to see something that he could then expel with a potent stare and a word of command?

*But I am not so far away as I seem,* Kelley thought. *And my soul is as large now as it has ever been. Perhaps I can see what needs to be seen, and hear what needs to be heard.* He did not know himself whether he was in deadly earnest, or merely planning a trick of his own.

When Field looked into the darkness that the stone seemed to contain, however, he did not do or say anything. His eyelids drooped slightly, and his rigid body slumped in the chair, but not as if he had suddenly become sleepy—more than that, in fact: as if he had suddenly become *heavier*. His features were devoid of expression, but his stare did not waver.

"Don't be afraid, Master Field," Kelley said, softly—but the Church Militant's ambushers were as quiet as mice now, and every word was audible. "A man like you has naught to fear from Heaven. But you can hear the angels, can you not? They are not singing, as the Romanists imagine they might, but jabbering in a language unknown to humankind, which was not included in the legacy of Babel. Only be patient, and they will deign to address you in English, although your ears might have to be better than my poor mutilated organs to interpret what they say in smooth and eloquent sentences."

Field would surely have cut him off before he got half way through this speech, had he been able to—but he was not. To his own followers, and to all but one of Kelley's companions, it probably seemed that Field was holding the stone voluntarily, looking into it of his own volition, but Kelley knew better. The stone had Field captive, just as securely as the net held the automaton—but that was all. Field was not going to speak, even if he did contrive to hear English spoken by the angels. The next step was up to Kelley.

"The angels are inaudible and invisible to the eyes of ordinary men," Kelley continued, raising his voice as he always had during his past performances as a false oracle, "but you and I are extraordinary, in our different ways, Master Field. We can hear the voices of the angelic host, and we can see them about their work, not merely as messengers but as guardians. We

can see them in the dark realm that is theirs, but we can also see them reaching into our world, and making themselves *felt* as beings made of matter might. They are not material themselves, of course, and there is something subtle and vaporous about their most urgent manifestations—but they can make themselves felt, can they not, Master Field?”

Unready to leave that particular challenge entirely to the power of suggestion, Kelley tried with all his might to make his words true: to use whatever mysterious potential was expanding out of him to manage the sensations of the watcher who could not help but look into the stone. Kelley imagined an angel emerging from the stone, like some angry ghost—not an angel from one of the Church decorations of which the Puritans disapproved so strongly, but an angel such as he had seen, at such a vast distance, within the void suggested by the stone’s black depths.

And something *did* emerge, although Kelley did not suppose that anyone but he and Field could see it.

It had wings, of a sort, but it did not have a humanoid body. Nor were its wings a dove’s or an eagle’s wings; they were the wings of some hasty buzzing insect. Insofar as the angel had a face, he supposed, it would have a face that was more like a locust’s than a human’s, but not so very like a locust as to resemble the Lunar horde that had already started work on an Armada of ether-ships with which to invade the Earth . . . because the angels were angels, after all.

Kelley had no idea how to make a face beautiful that was not at all human, or even to make it imperious, but he had to suppose that the angels did, and that his role here was merely that of a facilitator, like the philosopher’s stone that turned base metal into gold without itself being altered.

The angel was magnificent, after its fashion. It was huge, and dazzling, and unmistakably, undeniably, indubitably an angel. Kelley knew that John Dee, Giordano Bruno and the twelve brutal apostles of the Church Militant could not see it, but he knew that John Field could. Kelley even felt free to wonder whether this might, after all, have been the purpose of his mission—that the stone had sent him into Brother Cuthbert’s trap in order that it should finally be delivered, by cunning and mysterious means, into the hands of John Field, even though it would not remain there for long.

It was obvious that Field could see the angel towering over him, because he was no longer peering drowsily into the stone. He was looking up now, with his eyes wide open and his irises closing against the dazzling glare that only he and Kelley beheld. He could see the angel, and he knew the angel for what it was. He could also *hear* the angel.

What the angel commanded John Field to do, as Moses had once commanded Pharaoh, was to let his people go. The angel meant far more by that, however, than that John Dee and his companions should be released and allowed to make their way to Wilton unhindered. The angel meant that John Field’s Church Militant should respect the principle of tolerance that Queen Jane’s parliament had incorporated into English law. The angel meant that the Puritans should desist from stirring up a holy war in reflection of the long and fragmentary war that had been raging in Europe and the Americas for decades as petty prophets played into the

hands of secular ambition by providing justification for oppression and conquest. The angel meant that John Field must see the truth, and realize that the demons that his life was dedicated to combating were not what, or where, he thought they were.

And John Field, like Saul of Tarsus on the road of Damascus, accepted that revelation for what it was.

Edward Kelley, who knew that he was part and parcel of the instrumentality of the revelation, could not help but share in it. His own ideas and beliefs were not turned upside-down—quite the reverse. They were put on a firm foundation for the first time. He not only heard the voices of the angels, but understood them, for they were now more eloquent than ever before. His consciousness expanded much further than it already had, and much further than he had ever imagined possible. He felt, in fact, that he was being taken far beyond the bounds of human imagination, borne on angelic wings. He felt that he was being taken up to the summit of a paradisaical mount, there to look out upon the whole of Creation, acquiring a standpoint from which worlds like his own were mere motes of dust or tiny clouds of gas, while the spaces between them were crowded with life.

He saw that the infinitesimally tiny creatures that swarmed upon the tinier and lighter dust-worlds were, indeed, insects and other spineless creatures, although the greater number of them were intelligent, capable of awesome feats of engineering, and capable of flying in the ether as well as in air. He saw that the larger creatures that swam in the dense atmospheres of the gas-worlds were also invertebrates, formed as worms, jellyfish, or cephalopods rather than whales or seals. He understood that the greater number of the inhabited dust-worlds were hollow, with far more life inside them than on their surfaces; the life in question was soft and slimy, but no less intelligent for that. He understood how different humans were from the common run of dust and gas-dwellers, and that surfaces where entities weighed as much as they did on Earth, because of the denseness of the Earth's core and the power of affinity that held objects down, were normally hostile in the extreme to the evolution of complex life, let alone intelligence.

"So Bruno's principle of plenitude does not apply universally after all," Kelley said, although he did not pronounce the words aloud.

He got no verbal answer; the angel he had summoned from the stone was not Aristocles, or even Muram. He understood, though, that the principle of plenitude *did* apply, but was not quite what Giordano Bruno imagined it to be. It was the interpretation that was at fault—and that fault of interpretation was common to humankind's enemies and allies alike. It was for that reason, somehow, that the Great Armada would be launched—and for that reason, too, that the Great Armada had to be thwarted in its ambition.

"Earth is special, then," Kelley concluded. "Even on a vast universal stage, Earth stands at the focal point of a unique Creation, for which reason humans are God's chosen people." But that was flatly wrong, and he felt the force of his error as a blast of pure angelic contempt.

"You are, at best, a catalyst," he was told, by the angel that was not Aristocles, and must have been far older, if not wiser. "Earth is, at most, a philosopher's stone."

Then it was over, and he was back in the hall of the deserted manor house, where very little time seemed to have passed, and where only he and John Field were even conscious of the time that had passed. His expanded soul seemed to burst, and then shrivel to its ordinary dimensions, with a shock that left a cruelly authentic ache in his head. He put his hands up to cover his face for a moment or two, but collected himself soon enough and obtained enough mastery over his disturbed consciousness to put mere pain to the back of his mind.

When he looked again at the silent crowd, he knew that there had been a profound change in every one of them, although mere appearances had barely shifted at all. John Field had replaced the stone on the tabletop and was now sitting back in his chair, frowning thoughtfully. "It's just a stone," he said, in a tone that almost smacked of disappointment. "A piece of obsidian, shaped and polished to resemble a lens. It's a cozeners's device. It has no demons in it, any more than the man we captured in our net is a demon. All this is foolishness, in which wise and serious men should not become involved, when they have God's good work to do."

Kelley expected protestations, or at least expressions of surprise, in response to this declaration, but none came from anywhere. The other people present had neither heard nor seen any angel, but they had not by any means been unaffected by what had happened. They saw the world differently now, and if they had any awareness at all that they had ever seen recent events in another way, that other awareness now seemed to them to be a kind of dream, which could not begin to compete with the trustworthiness of their present sensory experience, and all the brutal pressure of obvious reality that went with it.

"Release that man," said Field—and three ambushers joined the spy named Simon in dragging away the heavy weights that constrained the prisoner within the net so closely that he could barely move. Then the net itself was lifted. Kelley looked at the face of the released man in amazement, unsure now as to how and why he had imagined that the tanned face was made of bronze, or that his bloodshot eyes were literally red. The man was a gypsy, to be sure, but he was definitely a man.

"You have no right to arrest us, Master Field," said John Dee, with only a hint of temerity in his voice. "I am an honest Englishman traveling in my own country. Master Bruno is a scholar, and my guest. Master Kelley and Master Talus are students. We are visiting fellow scholars at the home of one of the peers of England."

"You're incorrect, Dr. Dee," Field said, icily. "I have every right to arrest you, to investigate you, and to interrogate you, and would have that right even if you were not entertaining a Romanist who might easily be a spy for the French or the Italians. I had a duty, in fact, to act on the denunciations laid against you, which charged you with possession of magical devices provided by the Devil. It is obvious, however, that the charge is unfounded, and I can only conclude that the denunciation was malicious, perhaps encouraged by scholarly rivalry. Personally, I cannot see any merit in this book-collecting mania that has infected such men as you and Stephen Batman, and you ought to be very glad indeed that the grimoires and books of ritual magic that you have collected are such obvious fakes. Had I received a

darker report on the contents of your library from Master Bacon, I'd have thrown you in Hungerford jail overnight to teach you a lesson—and might have done that anyway, had I not heard that the jail is so ill-kept that its wall collapsed the night before last. You must not tempt me further by challenging my rights, though. I am the Church of England's strong right arm, the commander of the Church Militant. I have *every* right."

"That makes it all the more important, sir," John Dee replied, unrepentantly, "that you use your rights wisely, discreetly, and in the service of God. Might I take it, since you have interrogated us so minutely and found no fault, that we are free to go?"

"Aye," said Field. "My men and I have urgent business in London, and it would only slow us down to take you prisoner. Foolish scholars are no more worth the trouble of collecting than scabrous books, given that we have one book that tells us all that any God-fearing man could ever want or need to know."

Kelley opened his mouth to speak, but the gypsy to whom Dee had referred as Talus put a hand on his arm and moved his lips close to the scar where Kelley's right ear had once been.

"You must be careful now, Master Kelley," the gypsy breathed. "You, and you alone, know what the ethereals can do, even in an environment as hostile as this, and have at least an inkling of their sly means. Remember what I told you: they do nothing out of altruism; they have their own ends to pursue, and are not agreed amongst themselves as to what those ends ought to be. Aristocles is a powerful friend, and you'll doubtless be in dire need again of the kind of help he and his kind can provide—but you must not *trust* them, as you might desire to trust an honest angel. They might well believe, honestly, that they do God's work, conveying his messages and guarding the virtuous—but so did John Field, until they taught him better. Doctor Dee is a great mathematician, but philosophers, like tricksters, often fall prey to fancies they produce, and commit their faith too readily. You *know* what really happened just now, and you must cling to that knowledge lest it be stolen by forgetfulness. You may be sure that the ethereals will handle you gently, for they have no other catalyst here to match you, at least for the present."

Kelley was confused, but not by what the automaton had said—because he knew, even though he could no longer perceive the fact, that the automaton really was an automaton, with a face of bronze and blood-red eyes. He was confused because, even though he knew what had really happened, he now had a second set of memories in his mind, of a long and detailed interrogation to which Doctor Dee had been subjected by John Field, in the course of which Doctor Dee had deflected and deflated all Field's accusations and suspicions, so successfully that Field had been persuaded of the innocence of all his captives, at least in the matter of practicing sorcery.

John Dee, Kelley knew, would remember events that way, as would Field, and all the Church Militant's witnesses to the event. The automaton was correct, however; Kelley did know the truth, not merely of what had happened, but of how ingeniously the angels—the ethereals—could work, once they had the aid of an appropriate intermediary: what they and the automaton both called a "catalyst."

It was neither the black lens nor the red powder that was the real philosopher's stone, Kelley realized, but himself . . . and, in some larger and not-yet-graspable sense, the entire Earth.

He nodded to inform the gypsy that he had understood what he had been told, and was thoroughly resolved to be discreet. He went to the table to pick up the black stone and replace it in his satchel, which he shouldered without meeting any opposition. Then he turned to follow John Dee, Giordano Bruno, and the gypsy, who were being escorted through the gloomy vestibule by two members of the Church Militant while the remainder set about extinguishing candles, in the interests of thrift, like the good Puritans they were.

Once the four released prisoners were outside again, in the strange half-light that immediately precedes the dawn, Kelley was taken aside by someone else: the false Brother Cuthbert.

"You should be grateful to me," the impostor said. "Had I not given Master Field such a convincing account of your harmlessness, he'd never have bothered to interrogate Dee so carefully. I've played you false—though no more false, I think, than you played me in pretending to be a Catholic—but it has worked to your advantage. If not for me, you really might have been taken for a Satanist rather than a trickster and a fantasist. You should be careful, in future, about what you pretend to be. The pretense of being a cunning man, a fortune-teller, or a Paracelsian might impress credulous folk, but the word of God is spreading now as never before, and enlightenment will soon reach into every corner of English society. You will fare far better as an honest, God-fearing servant than any kind of mountebank."

"Thank you for your advice, Brother Cuthbert," Kelley said, deliberately using the false name even though he knew the true one. "I am indeed grateful to you, for I know what a narrow escape I've had. I'll certainly be careful in attempting to plan my future."

By the time this brief conversation had run its course, the first rays of the nascent sun were rising from the eastern horizon, proud and pure in their ambition.

"We cannot walk all day, having had no sleep," John Dee complained. "We must find a place to rest."

"Indeed we must," Giordano Bruno advised. "Wilton is a long way off, and we must conserve our strength as best we can. We have work to do when we arrive."

"Aye," said John Dee. "There's gold to be made, and wisdom to be cultivated."

"And an army to be gathered," said the gypsy, "and a fleet constructed. The odds will be against us, but we are forewarned and forearmed."

*Against our immediate enemies, at least,* Kelley thought, although he said nothing. He felt strangely intoxicated, yet again, as he made his way on to the muddy road and turned westward, but it was not the effect of angelic possession. This time, it was confidence in his destiny, and the knowledge that he had been set apart from common men. For the first time in his life, and in spite of his confusion, he knew that he was a true magician—which might well be a better thing to be than not, in the turbulent times that were to come. ○

## LIGHT ACROSS AN IMPOSSIBLE LAKE

Day breaks over the impossible lake  
seven light years long. A newborn may take  
from her birth to dawning self-awareness  
before the family's down-shore friends express

joy at seeing sunrise gleam in the east:  
Dawn, at last! They know this glow has increased  
to shocking morning on that first-touched shore—  
eyes upon the sky, they hope to see more

of what easterners are calling daylight.  
Straight against the wall, the child has her height  
marked in pencil. She loves her first-day dress.  
Class starts soon; her parents trained in darkness.

Down-shore friends will only now be learning  
how she was born and starts school this morning.  
Light bathes all the lake, and will for ages—  
far generations will see the edges

of their lake-lands turning red with sunset.  
Such thoughts fail to make those present forget  
what luck has been theirs: she who learns to play  
well with others on this beautiful day

soon will grow, wed, and, some hour, die,  
while the sun climbs higher into the sky.  
Her own child will never see first morning,  
just day, and, on the lake, bright sun burning.

—Mark Rich

### Introduction

**T**he many worlds of the alternative press continue to flourish and beckon. Let's drop in.

### Magazines

Small and alternative often means intimate, and that's certainly the case with the latest issue (#35) of *Talebones* (Fairwood Press, perfect-bound, \$7.00, 99 pages, ISSN 1084-7197). Editor and publisher Patrick Swenson bravely details in his editorial his marital/business/editorial breakup with his wife Honna, who was always half of Fairwood and its many enterprises. But he reassures us that the zine will go on under his aegis alone, and if the contents of this issue are any gauge, *Talebones* will continue to prosper. These accomplished stories run the gamut from pure SF to gothic to near-mimetic. Long-established names like William Nolan and Darrell Schweitzer consort with journeyman bylines, and the overall effect is of a pleasant sojourn among people who believe in the magic of storytelling, of whatever stripe.

Being present at the birth of a new magazine is always an exciting moment. So bop on over to the *Murky Depths* website <[murkydepths.com](http://murkydepths.com)> and sign on for an exciting journey. Issue #1 (perfect-bound, £6.99, 82 pages, ISSN 1752-5586) tidily illustrates the philosophy of editor-publisher Terry Martin, which is to blend shortish pieces of "dark specu-

lative" prose with arresting B&W graphics, and also to feature full-blown comics as well. One of the latter such opens the issue, with both script and art by Richard Calder. Contributors such as Jon Courtenay Grimwood and Lavie Tidhar keep the standards high, as do the lesser-known names. Slickly and sensitively designed, this is a magazine with a clear vision of how to jazz up our often visually staid field.

Meanwhile, at the opposite end of the longevity spectrum, we check in on *Interzone*, which is celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary. Under the creative hand of Andy Cox and his co-editors, the flagship of UK periodical SF boasts a fresh-faced, hip, *au courant* look, matched by fine prose and a reverence for its own roots. Issue #211 (saddle-stapled, £3.75, 64 pages, ISSN 0264-3596) is something of a special Michael Moorcock tribute, featuring a story, novel excerpt, interview, and a glimpse of the biography of Mervyn Peake that Moorcock releases in 2008. The zine's regular departments, including movie reviews by Nick Lowe and book reviews by John Clute, add further great value to this revered landmark journal.

### Nonfiction

Editor Stephen Haffner has assembled a wonderful tribute volume to the departed Jack Williamson. *In Memory of Wonder's Child: Jack Williamson* (Haffner Press, trade pa-

per, \$15.00, 112 pages, ISBN 978-1-893887-26-8) reprints three obituaries of the long-lived Grandmaster; a slew of appreciations by his peers; two of his stories, including his last-published one, "The Mists of Time"; some comics work (including a gorgeous full-color page from the strip *Beyond Mars* on the back cover); and a photomontage. This is a classy yet lively memorial to an SF pioneer, and, best of all, all sales feed into a scholarship fund in the name of Jack and Blanche Williamson.

Lovingly yet with crystalline critical vision, Michael Swanwick has penned a monograph on the career and prose of James Branch Cabell. The result—*What Can Be Saved from the Wreckage?* (Temporary Culture, trade paper, \$15.00, 53 pages, ISBN 978-0-9764660-3-1)—is as stimulating a career dissection as I have encountered in many a year. Swanwick sorts wheat from chaff, praises and damns, recommends and dissuades, all with the admirable goal of rescuing Cabell's best work from the bony grasp of obscurity. As one whose decades-long acquaintance with Cabell exactly parallels Swanwick's, I found his conclusions, approach and motives impeccable. Perhaps you will too.

With their latest offering, Jacob McMurray and his creative cohort at Payseur & Schmidt have outdone their past accomplishments in the realm of book-as-art-object. Nicola Griffith's autobiography, *And Now We Are Going to Have a Party: Liner Notes to a Writer's Early Life* (multi-media, \$75.00, 243 pages, ISBN 978-0-9789114-1-6) is a literal treasure box. Inside a sturdy slipcase are five handsome booklets containing Griffith's fascinating narrative; a poster; a music CD (Griffith and her old band sound like Siouxsie

Sioux fronting the Talking Heads); and other ephemera. The result is a life story wittily and bracingly told: brave, forthright, illuminating, passionate, rueful, and celebratory. If you melded Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006) with Aldiss's *The Twinkling of an Eye* (1998) and Delany's *The Motion of Light in Water* (1988), you might come up with a similar tale of a wild girl with literary sensibilities. Of late, Griffith seems to have left SF behind for thriller-mysteries. But her relationship to our field remains integral to her story.

### Poetry

Linda Addison's third book of poems, *Being Full of Light, Insubstantial* (Space & Time Books, trade paper, \$10.00, 109 pages, ISBN 978-0-917053-16-0), is, contrary to its title, most substantial indeed. It's a masterful assortment of over one hundred poems, most of them original to this book, full of joy and sorrow, wisdom and compassion, and close observation of life. Perhaps the key phrase to sum up its tenor is "hopeful, appreciative, wondering and caring." Addison treats of metaphysics, but also of topical matters such as 9/11, Katrina and New Orleans, and war. She's both fantastical—as in "Mermaid in the Bronx"—and mimetic, as in "The Barn." Anyone who can make you believe in a pickled embryo as an enticing protagonist ("The Cosmic Adventures of Jar Boy") is a master wordsmith indeed.

Tom Disch's first book of poems in ten years, *About the Size of It* (Anvil Press Poetry, \$16.95, 157 pages, ISBN 978-0-85646-391-4), is a pagan parade of panache and prodigious prolificity. Disch's formidable formal talents are exactly counter-

poised by his irreverent wit. While a sense of mortality hovers over many of the poems in this volume, the reader gets the sense of a writer determined to extract the last morsel of juice from life, however bitter-sweet. The first section of the book, "About the Size of It," contains poems like "The Vinidication of Obesity" which muse on abstruse matters. "Love and Death," part two, finds tenderness and folly everywhere, even in the image of "Medusa at Her Vanity." Part three, "Ars Gratia Artis," features a great pastiche of Robert Service. In part four, "Theories of Other People," "Jerusalem Recaptured" employs William Blake's eye and style on modern scenes and themes. And finally, "The Great Outdoors" finds Disch in the realm "where mushrooms/Rhyme to each other on a dead log." Taken all in all, this volume is a majestic panorama of creation—and mankind's tragicomic role therein.

You could not ask for a better overview of state-of-the-art fantastical poetry than you will receive from *The 2007 Rhysling Anthology* (SFPA, trade paper, \$12.95, 131 pages, ISBN 978-0-8095-7219-9). Starting with a stimulating and cogent explicatory essay by editor Drew Morse, we move on to a feast of verse. Nearly one hundred poems, from about half as many individuals and sources, chart the broad frontiers of speculative poetry. Famous contributors like Bruce Boston, Joe Halde- man, Ursula K. LeGuin, Ian Watson, and Gregory Benford are matched by dozens of other fine poets whose names you need to know. Every conceivable topic and theme and not a few formalistic variations are on display here, in both long and short forms. I can't really single out a favorite item (although I found Ben-

ford's elegy for Asimov, "Isaac from the Outside," very touching). But if you can't find something that thrills or excites you in this book, you're simply deaf to poetry.

## Anthologies

Editors Sean Wallace and Paul Tremblay produce on a regular basis a fine periodical titled *Fantasy*. As a kind of sampler, they have now issued an original anthology bearing that same name (Prime, trade paperback, \$6.95, 170 pages, ISBN 978-0-8095-5699-1). The low price makes it a kind of loss-leader for the magazine, an attempt to seduce new readers. But make no mistake, this volume is quality goods in its own right. Eleven stories range across a certain region of the map of the fantastical. Margaret Ronald inhabits a medieval setting with "Goosegirl." Samantha Henderson conflates an alien with King Arthur's court in "Shallot." Modern times are infused with weirdness in Lisa Mantchev's "The Greats Come A-Callin' " and Jeremiah Tolbert's "The Yeti Behind You." And Holly Phillips dips into the near future with "Brother of the Moon." All of these stories feature sharply honed prose, fine characterization, and stimulating plots. But my one complaint is a certain sameness of affect and effect. They all inhabit a certain identical emotional and speculative and linguistic range. No New Weird or gothic or transgressive here. One final comment: please note that ten out of eleven of these wonderful newish authors are women, indicative of a strong wave of female fantasists surging forward for our future delight.

The Pittsburgh SF club known as

PARSEC must be a talented and thriving organization, based on their publishing wing known as PARSEC Ink. They issue an annual anthology, and this year's is a swell one. *Triangulation: End of Time* (trade paper, \$12.00, 155 pages, ISBN 978-0-6151-5280-6), edited by Pete Butler, revolves around various fruitful catastrophes. Time travel figures in several stories, either amusingly or soberly, its paradoxes causing one kind of ruination or another. But other big ideas abound, such as the notion of a runaway country, in "America Is Coming!" by Dario Ciriello. A strange cosmos featuring an infinite "Forever Sea" crops up in Kurt Kirchmeier's "Surface Tension." Perhaps the most ambitious and accomplished piece is Jetse de Vries's "Near Absolute Zero," where in a famous scientist is moved to inexplicable destructive acts based on a glimpse through an alien artifact. This whole volume is equal to any typical issue of your favorite prozine, and will reward your investment.

Featuring a munificent thirty stories, *At Ease With the Dead* (Ash Tree Press, trade paper, \$29.00, 375 pages, ISBN 978-1-55310-095-9) presents a dilemma to any reviewer intent on limning the volume in as small a space as I have. It's arguably unfair to single out a story or two for the spotlight, especially when all of them exhibit such high levels of excellence. Instead, I'll try to convey the general tone and effect of the whole anthology. Editors/publishers Christopher and Barbara Roden are scholars of the classical ghost/horror/weird tale, and in fact the main output of their superior small press consists of reprints from that canon, minor and major authors both. So as you might suspect, when it comes time to generate an original anthol-

ogy, their selections will hew rather closely to the virtues exemplified by authors like M. R. James and Robert Aickman, rather than, say, Clive Barker and Joe Hill. Thus all these stories possess a certain gravitas and stateliness. Their telling is leisurely and decompressed, their frights subtle and sophisticated, the gore minimal. But this shared attitude toward and presentation of the fantastical does not, surprisingly, create an altogether old-fashioned ambiance. The majority of these stories inhabit contemporary times and indeed convey a peculiarly modern sense of unease. The authors here—including such luminaries as Melanie Tem, Chet Williamson, and Joel Lane—have firm and sensitive fingers on the pulse of twenty-first-century society, and succeed in invoking shivers and awe that will compete with headlines any day.

### Single-Author Collections

Heather Shaw craftily offers us both allegory and naturalism, symbolism and precisely observed reportage in her collection *When We Were Six* (Tropism Press, chapbook, \$5.00, 52 pages, ISBN unavailable). Thus she gets the best of both worlds, consensus reality and the vibrant terrain of her imagination. In "Single White Farmhouse," the sentient domicile of an average family gets rather frisky. "Mountain, Man" finds a hermit taking up with a strange woman who embodies all creation. A young deformed student's life is remade by another magical woman in "Restoration." "When We Were Twelve" features a family of clones striving to keep Daddy happy. "Famishing" details how in an Asian country an overweight woman dis-

covers a magical cure for her problems. And finally, "Wetting the Bed" sets a strange fleet afloat during the days of a new Biblical Flood. All these stories show zest, glee, and insight into the human condition—rare qualities in any writer.

In her much-anticipated debut collection, *Dangerous Space* (Aqueduct Press, trade paper, \$18.00, 256 pages, ISBN 978-0933500-13-3), Kelley Eskridge can sound like Samuel Delany, Theodore Sturgeon, Fritz Leiber, or Joanna Russ, while still maintaining her own unique throaty, modulated voice. A non-trivial accomplishment indeed. These seven stories cover a wide territory stylistically and venue-wise, while all adhering to the same authorial POV that regards the world as a dangerous, delightful place, where extending oneself to others and opening oneself up to experience necessarily entails the possibility of suffering. "Strings" presents a future where music has been robbed of improvisation. "And Salome Danced" gives us an actor with some uncanny supernatural abilities. A "dust-devil" bag lady holds some startling secrets in "City Life." Postmodern sword-and-sorcery is the motif in "Eye of the Storm," while a cyberpunkish vision appertains to "Somewhere Down the Diamondback Road." Original to this collection, the long title story is a mimetic rendition of the pop musician's life. And finally, "Alien Jane" brings us inside a cruel mental asylum where the title character undergoes a lab-animal existence narrated by a fellow patient who might be her only friend. Eskridge's output accretes only slowly—the oldest story here dates from 1990—but like well-aged wine, these tales decant superbly.

## Novels and Novellas

In 1970, Philip José Farmer began a novella centered around an SCA-style enclave set amidst a post-scarcity culture of the twenty-second century. As one of his patented "pocket universes," the idea might not have had the cosmic resonance of *World of Tiers* or *Riverworld*, but it held the potential for a nice little satirical romp. Unfortunately, the piece was never finished—until now, thanks to the aid of PJF's nephew, Danny Adams. The result is *The City Beyond Play* (PS Publishing, hardcover, \$20.00, 112 pages, ISBN 978-1-905834-24-2). This tale has a kind of antique charm, like a lost episode of the original *Star Trek*. On a surface narrative level, it moves capably through an adventure wherein Wilson Gore, murderer on the lam, learns how to be a better person by conforming to the medieval strictures of Scadia. But PJF's savage wit, scabrous rebellion, enthusiastic pulp brio, and mythic archetypes are missing, whether through a deficiency in PJF's original outline/conception, or in Adams's transcription of the story. It's Twain's *Connecticut Yankee* redux, a pleasant confection but no more.

If you blended J.K. Huysmans, Clark Ashton Smith, and Gene Wolfe into a single individual, he might resemble Forrest Aguirre—at least when that well-known editor/author is producing a novella like *Swans Over the Moon* (Wheatland Press, trade paper, \$14.95, 112 pages, ISBN 978-0-9794054-0-2). Far in the future, the Moon is inhabited by warring kingdoms, one of which is Procellarium. Here, the Judicar Pelevin rules with a stern hand, amidst much baroque pomp and splendor. His three daughters—

Selene, Basia, and Cimbri—are the center around which his personal life revolves. (Echoes of *King Lear*!) But only Selene comforts him, as the other two are traitors and thorns in his side—or so he believes. Thus, amidst war and diplomacy, family psychodynamics enact themselves to the bitter end of a stimulating roco-co tragedy.

Magical realism is a tough mode to bring off. Books in this vein can often sound twee or fey or forced or artificial. But the best magical realism exhibits a kind of reverence for the mysteries of life, illuminates the strangeness of the human condition, and entertains the reader with a tragicomic perspective. Randall Silvis fulfills this mission in his novel *In a Town Called Mundomuerto* (Omnidawn Publishing, trade paper, \$12.95, 160 pages, ISBN 978-1-890650-19-3). An old man named Alberto feels compelled to tell the same mythic story of his youth over and over each day to a fifteen-year-old boy ("... to allow the story its opportunity to speak . . ."), until the boy becomes a half-complicit bard himself. Alberto's tale concerns Lucia Luna, the village's most beautiful woman, and how she danced one night with a dolphin god in human form, and became pregnant by the visitor. All communal propriety goes topsy-turvy, and Lucia Luna's life becomes threatened. Only the young Alberto, in love with the older woman, can save her, by accosting the dolphin-man in his lair. By turns droll, somber, reflective, rueful, and hopeful, this story speaks of eternal verities in very specific mortal masks.

Like some devilishly sly hybrid of Howard Hendrix, John Brunner, Norman Spinrad, and Lance Olsen, David Memmott spins a metaphysical "postcyberpunk" novel in *Prime*

*Time* (Wordcraft of Oregon, trade paper, \$15.00, 271 pages, ISBN 978-1-877655-53-1), the first volume in a new trilogy-to-be. Memmott is intent on examining deep epistemological and ontological issues concerning the way humanity fashions its own reality, but he embeds his questions in a captivating thriller. He marshalls his extensive cast of characters with precision and brevity of introduction (giving just enough of their backstories to firmly embed the players in our perceptions) and then weaves their lifepaths together in a glorious tangle. From corporate boardrooms to gang warrens, he lays out a tangible future world. Memmott's mid-twenty-first-century globe is swept up in Dreamtime, a virtual reality of surpassing heft. But lurking in the wings is Primetime, an upgrade that "offers vital enhancements to Dreamtime, but certain anomalies seeped into the virtual worlds with alarming regularity." With juicy neologisms and racing subplots, Memmott ponders the big issues raised by his new technology. As one character opines,

"What is personal identity? Where are the boundaries? Are we the membranes through which information flows? Are we the synapses that fire in response to stimulus? Are we mindless hosts of selfish genes. . . ? Are we colonies whose every action is the result of some consensus among individual members? Primetime is the door into what Alfred Whitehead called 'unbounded potential for creative advance,' the moving boundary of co-creation."

This is philosophic SF at its best. ○

# SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

This is crunch time for deciding which Memorial Day convention is the one that's right for your interests. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 5 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

## MAY 2008

16-18—KeyCon. For info, write: Box 3178, Winnipeg MB R3C 4E6. Or phone: (204) 772-5415 (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). (Web) [keycon.org](http://keycon.org). (E-mail) [2008@keycon.org](mailto:2008@keycon.org). Con will be held in: Winnipeg MB (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Radisson Skyview. Guests will include: E. Flint, J. Yolen, D. Mattingly, T. Huff, L. Ski. SF/fantasy.

16-18—MobiCon. [mobicon.org](http://mobicon.org). Best Western Ashbury, Mobile AL. R. Picardo, Jim Butcher, Larry Elmore, P. Burns.

16-19—EatonCon. (951) 827-3233. [eatonconference.ucr.edu](http://eatonconference.ucr.edu). U. of CA, Riverside. Ray Bradbury, Fred Pohl. Academic.

17-18—NordCon. [nordcon.de](http://nordcon.de). Hamburg House, Hamburg Germany. Annual northern-Germany con.

22-26—International Space Development Convention. [isdc.nss.com](http://isdc.nss.com). Venue TBA. Promoting expansion into space.

23-25—MarCon. [marcon.org](http://marcon.org). Hyatt, Columbus OH. Weisskopf, Van Tilburg, Brust, Sola, Dr. James Alexander, Standlee.

23-25—Oasis. [oasfis.org](http://oasfis.org). Sheraton Downtown, Orlando FL. David (Tribbles) Gerrold, Paul Vincenti, the Suttons.

23-25—FanimeCon. [fanime.com](http://fanime.com). [help@fanime.com](mailto:help@fanime.com). Convention Center, San Jose CA. For anime fans.

23-25—Anime North. [animenorth.com](http://animenorth.com). Toronto ON. For anime fans.

23-25—ConDuit. (919) 941-5050. [animazement.org](http://animazement.org). Sheraton City Centre, Salt Lake City UT. General SF/fantasy con.

23-25—Animazement. (919) 941-5050. [animazement.org](http://animazement.org). Sheraton, Durham NC. For anime fans.

23-26—BaltiCon. (410) 563-3727. [balticon.org](http://balticon.org). Marriott, Hunt Valley (Baltimore) MD. C. Willis, artist J.J. Palencar.

23-26—BayCon. [baycon.org](http://baycon.org). Hyatt and Convention Center, Santa Clara CA. T. Powers, T. Lockwood, S. Sigler, P. Wells.

23-26—ConQuest. [kcssciencefiction.org](http://kcssciencefiction.org). Airport Hilton, Kansas City MO. General SF/fantasy con.

23-26—WisCon. [wiscon.info](http://wiscon.info). Concourse Hotel, Madison WI. Maureen F. McHugh, L. Timmel Duchamp. Feminism and SF.

23-26—MediaWest\*Con. [mediawestcon.org](http://mediawestcon.org). Holiday Inn South, Lansing MI. Older crowd than most media cons.

23-26—MisCon. (406) 544-7093. [miscon.org](http://miscon.org). Ruby's Inn, Missoula MT. General SF and fantasy convention.

23-26—TimeGate. [timegatecon.org](http://timegatecon.org). Holiday Inn Chamblee/Dunwoody Rd., Atlanta GA. Doctor Who and Stargate.

30-June 1—ConCarolinas, Box 9100, Charlotte NC 28299. [concarolinas.org](http://concarolinas.org). Mike Resnick, Kim Harrison, F. Hunter.

30-June 1—A-Kon, 3352 Broadway Blvd. #470, Garland TX 75043. [a-kon.com](http://a-kon.com). Dallas TX. Anime, comics and more.

30-June 1—Relaxacon. [arisia.org](http://arisia.org). Cape Cod MA. Meet-'n'-greet for volunteers for next year's big Arisia con.

30-June 2—New Zealand Nat'l. Con, c/o Box 16150, Wellington South, NZ. [sf.org.nz](http://sf.org.nz). Somewhere in NZ.

## JUNE 2008

6-8—SoonerCon, 6006 S. Western, Oklahoma City OK 73139. (405) 632-2848. [soonercon.com](http://soonercon.com). SF, fantasy & gaming.

6-8—ConComCon, c/o Box 1066, Seattle WA 98111. [swoc.org/ccubed](http://swoc.org/ccubed). Northwest con organizers meet to talk shop.

6-8—Australia Nat'l. Con, c/o Box 1212, Melbourne VIC 3001, Australia. [natcon.org.au](http://natcon.org.au). Somewhere in Australia.

6-8—ColoniaCon. [coloniacon2006.de](http://coloniacon2006.de). Köln (Cologne), Germany. A major media-oriented German convention.

## AUGUST 2008

6-10—Denvention 3, Box 1349, Denver CO 80201. [denvention3.org](http://denvention3.org). Bujold, Stembach, Whitmore. WorldCon. \$200.

## AUGUST 2009

6-10—Anticipation, CP 105, Montreal QC H4A 3P4. [anticipationsf.ca](http://anticipationsf.ca). Gaiman, Hartwell, Doherty. WorldCon. US\$150+.

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**CatonInetales.net** - Free SF Download. Two Novellas, Eleven Short Stories. Paper copy available on POD and Amazon on-site. *Oracle and Other Stories* by W. Strawn Douglas

**ALIEN SYNDROME**, Noel Huntley. Catastrophic alien error, or invasion of Earth? [www.xlibris.com/bookstore](http://www.xlibris.com/bookstore); [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)

**Michael Swanwick on Cabell: What Can Be Saved from the Wreckage?** \$20 postpaid from: Henry Wessells, POB 43072, Upper Montclair, NJ 07043

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# NEXT ISSUE

## AUGUST ISSUE

One of science fiction's greatest hidden treasures, **Neal Barrett, Jr.**, returns with the lead story of our August issue. In "Radio Station St. Jack" Barrett directs his sights, as in many of his best stories, to yet another post-apocalypse, one in which Father Mac must somehow protect his radio station, his faithful flock, and the nun he loves, from Bob the Destroyer's rampaging raiders, (and hopefully preserve his own tender posterior in the process). This is a wild and witty tale of a down-to-earth padre just trying to keep it together after the rest of the world's fallen apart—we think you'll love it.

## ALSO IN AUGUST

Acclaimed new writer **Ted Kosmatka** returns with a new hard-SF story about a laboratory experiment, once thought harmless, that just might rip the world apart under its "Divining Light"; **Carol Emshwiller** aims right for the heart-strings with her tragic tale of an innocent stranger in our strange land who goes by the name of either "Wilmer or Wesley"; **Robert Reed** warns that the local senior citizens you see harmlessly feeding pigeons in the park might not be what they seem in "Old Man Waiting"; **Matthew Johnson** presents a timely and uncomfortable portrait of the outsourcing woes of the future in "Lagos"; **Jack Skillingstead** demonstrates that "What You Are About to See" might just be the result of an unseen alien agenda; and **J. Chris Rock**, making a strong *Asimov's* debut, describes the perilous journey of "Lucy" along the murky seas of Saturn's moon Titan.

## OUR EXCITING FEATURES

**Rudy Rucker** contributes a new Thought Experiments column that forecasts no less than the strange shape of future humanity after "The Great Awakening"; **Robert Silverberg** calls upon over fifty years of experience to present "Some Thoughts on the Short Story" in his "Reflections" column; **James Patrick Kelly** goes back to school with the intention of "Storming the Academy" in "On the Net"; **Peter Heck** presents "On Books"; plus an array of pleasant poetry by many of your favorite poets. Look for our August issue at your newsstand on June 24, 2008. Or you can subscribe to *Asimov's*—by mail or online, in varying formats, including downloadable forms, by going to our website, [www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com)—and make sure that you don't miss any of the great stuff we have coming up!

## COMING SOON

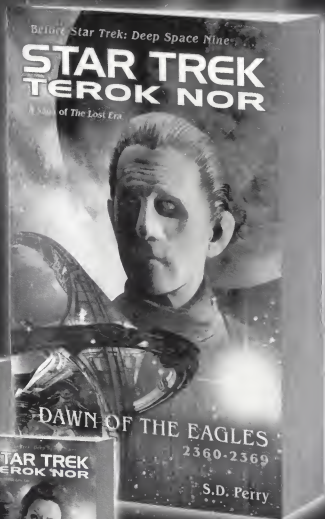
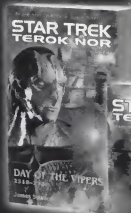
new stories by **Nancy Kress**, **William Barton**, **Melanie Tem & Steve Rasnick Tem**, **Ian R. MacLeod**, **Stephen Baxter**, **Mary Rosenblum**, **Larry Niven**, **Geoffrey A. Landis**, **Robert Reed**, **Ian Creasey**, **Jack Skillingstead**, **Robert R. Chase**, **Will McIntosh**, **Steven Utley**, and many others. . . .

The saga of Terek Nor continues!

# The winds of change are stirring...

As violence continues to escalate across Bajor, Cardassian forces tighten their grip on the captive planet—but the resistance is brewing into a hurricane that will change the landscape of the Occupation forever.

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